

SOLDIER

MAGAZINE OF THE BRITISH ARMY



EYES ON

Infanteers get stuck into Europe's biggest urban fighting complex

INSIDE: Ukraine interview

'It's the new **king of the battlefield** – all other weapons are subordinate'

Drone pilot



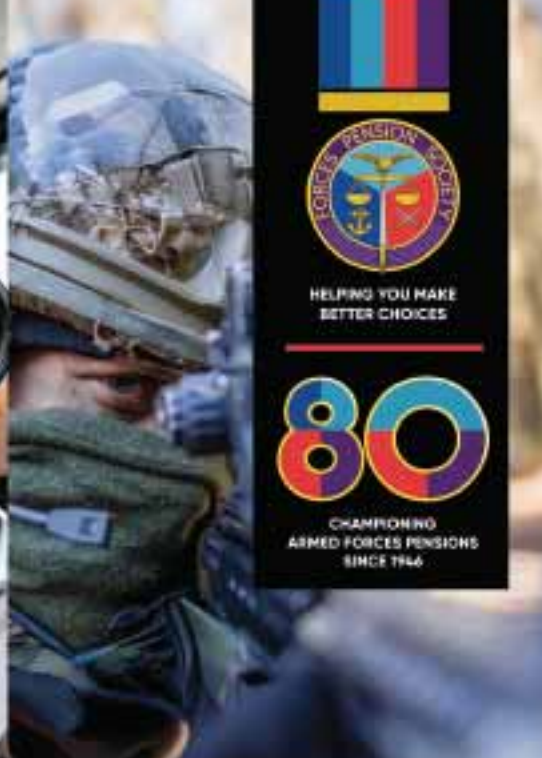
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OUR CONTRIBUTORS THIS MONTH...



GEN SIR ROLY WALKER

IF YOU want to know what the man in charge of the British Army has in store during 2026, turn to **page 7** and read his New Year message to *Soldier* readers. Needless to say, preparing for war comes up...



CPL HARRY CONNELL, R YORKS

WE'RE sure it wasn't the first thing he wanted to do post endex, but thanks to the junior NCO for giving us a rundown of his best (and worst) parts of Army life on **page 12**.



CSGT LOUIS HUGHES, PARA

TEAMING up with Capt Juan Vilches (RLC), this NCO had the honour of becoming the first army padel champion. Read his thoughts on the historic win on **page 70**.

Happy New Year to all our readers

JANUARY is a strange magazine to put together.

While everyone else spends late December focused on work parties and time off (if they're lucky), our team scratch their heads trying to decide what troops will want to be reading about back in barracks in a few weeks' time.

The answer, I fear, is 'not much' – but given UK stats show we all hammer online holiday research in the early New Year (just look at the volume of ads hitting you right now, if you don't believe me) we thought travel was as good a place to start 2026 as any.

Whether you're new to the ranks, or have been kicking around for some time, read on to find a wealth of information on the kind of overseas activities that make army life anything but dull.

From sports tournaments (page 73) to Europe's biggest urban facility (page 26) and drills beneath the Rock of Gibraltar (page 34) – plus an unmissable interview from the front lines of Ukraine (page 42) – this issue is all about looking way beyond the confines of Blighty.

We want to know what you've got lined up overseas this year, so if there is something interesting looming – be it an exped or training exercise – drop us a line at news@soldiermagazine.co.uk and you could get the outing captured in glossy colour across these pages.



If your ambitions for 2026 are more creative, turn to page 54 where we launch this year's Army Photographic Competition. Following last year's brilliant contest – which saw winners saluted by singer-songwriter Bryan Adams – we cannot wait to see what this showcase has in store.

And if you're reading this before January 9, don't forget to enter our competition to win two easyJet return tickets to a destination of your choice. More details via the QR code above. Happy New Year!

Sarah Goldthorpe • **Editor**



'We thought travel was a good place to start'



ARMY



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SOLDIER

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ARMY
BE THE BEST

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A New Year message to troops from the head of the British Army...

Picture: Cpl Becky Brown, RLC



‘OUR STRENGTH COMES FROM YOU’

AS WE step into 2026, I want to take a moment to reflect on the year gone by and look ahead to the opportunities and challenges that await us.

First and foremost, I hope you were able to spend some time over the holidays with those you love and want to be with, recharging and reconnecting.

For those of you who were deployed on operations during this period, you have my heartfelt gratitude. I know what that feels like, and you have done your duty.

Being away from family and friends at such a time is never easy, and your commitment and sacrifice do not go unnoticed.

On behalf of all of us – your colleagues and the nation – thank you.

Looking back, 2025 was a transformative year for the British Army.

The Strategic Defence Review gave us a clear sense of direction and urgency, while the government’s commitment to a generational increase in defence funding

marked a turning point for our future.

We also saw defence take bold steps to address long-standing challenges, such as service accommodation, with unprecedented investment and action.

The army demonstrated its ability to innovate and adapt, embracing digitisation and artificial intelligence in ways that are already reshaping how we operate.

From the multinational exercise Convergence to the cutting-edge Project Asgard, we’ve shown that we can think differently and act decisively, harnessing technology to enhance our effectiveness on the battlefield and beyond.

As we look to 2026, the world remains as unpredictable and complex as ever.

From our over-the-shoulder support to our Ukrainian partners to preparing for emergencies closer to home, the British Army will continue to adapt and deliver.

But our strength doesn’t come from technology or equipment alone – it comes from

you. Your skills, determination, courage, and camaraderie are what make the British Army one of the most respected forces in the world.

This year will also bring exciting opportunities for growth and development. The arrival of transformational equipment will enhance our capabilities, but equally important is how we look after and treat one another.

We need everyone to feel valued, empowered, and on the team sheet for 2026. Let’s make that an easy thing for those who didn’t feel that way in 2025.

It just remains for me to say it is my greatest privilege and honour to lead an organisation as inspiring and resilient as the British Army.

Over the next year I want you to continue working towards doubling our fighting power by 2027 and tripling it by 2030.

Thank you for all that you do. And Happy New Year to you all.

**Gen Sir Roly Walker,
Chief of the General Staff**

WHERE TO FIND SOLDIER



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1 FALKLAND ISLANDS

Peak performers

SOLDIERS and civilians based in the South Atlantic dug deep in aid of good causes as they took on a punishing endurance race across key battlegrounds of the 1982 Falklands War.

The annual Three Peaks Challenge sees teams and individuals complete a 12-mile route against the clock, scaling Mount Longdon, Tumbledown and Two Sisters along the way.

Among the competitors in this year's event were the current Roulement Infantry Company – 1st Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment – with one of their squads missing out on the top spot by a matter of seconds.

Team honours went to organisers, the Falkland Islands Defence Force, while the fastest individual runner crossed the finish line in an impressive 1hr 35min.

A TASTE OF ARMY ACTIVITY ACROSS THE WORLD

GLOBAL SITREP



2 INDIA

Heritage and history

A BRITISH Army delegation travelled to India to deepen their understanding of the shared military history between the two nations.

Taking in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Delhi and Rajasthan, the 12-strong group engaged with communities and senior officials in a programme also aimed at broadening cultural awareness.

Highlights included a visit to Delhi War Cemetery, plus religious and other sites such as the Golden Temple in Amritsar and memorials to the Battle of Saragarhi.

Maj Munish Chauhan (RAMS) said at the heart of the two-week experience was personnel learning about the heritage of the Indian troops who fought alongside Britain in two world wars.

"The impact on the team was genuine and profound," he added.

3 FRANCE

Lancs prep for action

A FULL-ON urban warfare package is looming for members of 1st Battalion, The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment.

A 120-strong group centred on Burma Company are joining French counterparts from 152nd Infantry Regiment at the state-of-the-art facility near Reims, known as Cenzub, where they will be helping as their allies are validated for Nato duties in Eastern Europe.

British Officer Commanding, Maj Lance Morris, said personnel had been ramping up for Exercise Gaulish by checking out the French equipment they will be using, including the Heckler & Koch 416 assault rifle. Some had also been learning the language.

The soldiers would be honing protocols on their own dismounted situational awareness kit and unmanned systems during the manoeuvres, he added.

Maj Morris concluded: "We are leaving for three-and-a-half weeks in early February and will also have elements of 25 Engineer Regiment joining us."

"The troops are super-excited as we begin what promises to be a busy year."

Read how members of 1st Battalion, The Royal Yorkshire Regiment fared during their stint at Cenzub on page 26.



4 ESTONIA

Wolf pack on the move

SPECIALISTS from different disciplines hit the depths of Eastern Europe's winter as the Theatre Support Squadron deployed together on Op Cabrit for the first time.

The formation, which included loggies and REME troops, showed their teeth on Exercise Alert Wolf as they flexed their resupply and repair skills across the country, including close to the Russian border.

Maj Mark Roberts (REME), OC, said his personnel had performed well in a range of taskings and much had been learned in supporting the British-led Nato battlegroup.

"The exercise provided the squadron with an opportunity to train as we fight," he added. "It enabled us to take significant steps towards our operationalisation, helping to turn the TSS into a warfighting-focused organisation."



5

FINLAND

Deep freeze drills

MEMBERS of 3rd Battalion, The Rifles signalled their solidarity with some of Nato's newest troops during Exercise Northern Axe.

One of the biggest drills since Finland joined the alliance in 2023 – involving 3,000 personnel and 600 vehicles – the training was staged in the icy wilderness of Vuosanka, some 30 miles from the border with Russia.

Serials included live-fire attacks and defensive tactics – all while dealing with freezing temperatures and challenging terrain, an opportunity the British contingent appreciated.

Picture: Chris Fletcher



“Being based in the UK, we don’t often get the chance to practise this, so the Finns have been giving us some pointers,” said Rfn James Whittingham.

“They’re the professionals when it comes to cold weather and have also helped us with our skiing skills.”

Finland is one of the few European countries to retain conscription.

Its Kainuu Brigade trains two cohorts of recruits every year.

Maj Kari Sukkonen said Finnish reservists were highly motivated to defend their country.

“We know the threat is higher than it used to be, so we have a lot of people willing to come and refresh their skills,” he added.



6

NEPAL

High Achievers

ARMY mountaineers became the first British military outfit to climb Ama Dablam.

Dubbed the Matterhorn of the Himalayas, the peak is considered one of the most technically difficult in the world, with three separate camps, four days of climbing and several rock faces involved in the 6,812m ascent.

The group of 11 regulars and reservists spent a week trekking from Lukla to the base of the mountain before undergoing further training with expert Nepalese guides.

Maj Arthur Purbrick (RL, above) was one of two exped members to eventually summit, however others had to sacrifice the opportunity to help a teammate who had fallen ill.

Reflecting on the experience, the officer said it fulfilled a long-held personal ambition.

“It is clear that I would never have had the chance except through joint services adventurous training,” he added.

“I mountaineer to scare myself and it works. This is one of the most demanding and challenging things I have done since being on combat operations.”

‘I had bullets hitting all around me, plus shrapnel, mortars and multiple rocket launchers’

Ukrainian drone pilot shares tales from the front line – page 42



GROUND VIEW

Army Sergeant Major WO1 John Miller gives his take on service life...

LAST year seemed to go very quickly – probably because of how busy we all continue to be.

The British Army is working globally, with commitments stretching from Eastern Europe to the Falkland Islands. Our exercise and training programme, too, is continuing apace.

However, we can expect no let up and the coming months are going to be a critical period – not least because, come this time in 2027, we must have doubled our fighting power as per the mandate laid down by the Chief of the General Staff, Gen Sir Roly Walker.

We will then need to maintain our momentum to fulfil the second part of his directive – to treble it by the end of the decade.

There are a couple of points I'll raise on this front.

The first is that we must continue to focus on our own part in achieving these aims – in short, doing our job to the very best of our ability.

'It's important we don't get distracted by events over which we have no control'

While it is healthy for us all to have a professional curiosity about the wider world, it is important that we don't get distracted, worried or disheartened by events over which we have no control.

Let us instead ensure that we are doing our soldiering well, mastering our tradecraft, building strong teams and improving our organisation.

It is also important we embrace new technology as it comes online and provide feedback throughout the chain of command to ensure it delivers what we need.

We return here to the word 'techcraft', which I've mentioned before. It is all about the link between the technologists producing our kit and us as tacticians.

AI is something I've been talking about lately – and it is a classic example of an area where we can help.

We must be able to think critically as soldiers when we use AI and treat it more like a teammate rather than a tool. This is not going to be a proverbial magic wand – the most powerful weapon is a soldier with a good mind and ability to use it.

The coming year will be demanding, but it is an opportunity to develop professionally as we uprate our army.

WO1 Miller's month...

Visits

- Unit visits: NCO Academy Tea and Toast talk

Impressed with

- Progress towards CGS' goal

Areas of focus

- Providing useful feedback on kit

Coming up next

- DSTL and Defence Driving School visits

AIRBORNE ENDEX



Pictures: ASI Liam Derbyshire and Cpl Tomas Barnard, both RAF

ARMY aviation chiefs have spoken of their satisfaction after a UK-wide training package gave pilots and their supporting crews a clean bill of health.

Exercise Pinion Titan, which we covered during the opening stages in last month's issue, saw an all-up 1st Aviation Brigade put through its paces for the first time in manoeuvres that tested the formation from top to bottom.

The resupply chain in particular was flexed as the service's Apache (top) and Wildcat helicopters (right) plus Gazelle gunships from the French Armee de Terre.

Around 50 aircraft and 2,000 troops were involved, validating the full operational capability of the brigade in partnership with Nato allies.

Exercise planner Capt Bobby Durham (AAC) explained that mock missions had been flown



from Scotland to Salisbury Plain Training Area, where the crews backed serials run by other units.

The officer told *Soldier*: "We achieved our objectives and the Brigade Support Group worked well. This allowed the formation to conduct warfighting at scale, carrying out a range of serials, including deep strike missions, during an intense schedule."

Pinion Titan's two battlegroups were led by 3 and 4 Regiments, Army Air Corps with their troops facing demanding weather conditions throughout.

Picture: ASI Hamilton Palmer, RAF



Satellites are just one piece of infrastructure the new set-up will protect

REORG OF MILITARY INTEL

DEFENCE intelligence is being beefed up as the UK comes under more threat from hostile states and terrorists.

A new organisation – the Military Intelligence Services (MIS) – has been set up in response to a growing number of cyber attacks, disinformation and disruption to satellites and shipping.

Based at Wyton in Cambridgeshire, the centre will see army specialists working alongside tri-service colleagues under one umbrella for the first time in a move

aimed at speeding up how information is gathered, analysed and shared.

At the same site, a Defence Counter-Intelligence Unit has also been launched to boost MoD resilience, with officials admitting there has been a 50 per cent rise in incidents over the past year.

These include the targeting of personnel, tech programmes, supply chains and the wider defence industry.

The new set-up will also help protect the nuclear deterrent and infrastructure.

A ROYAL HONOUR

A RESPECTED officer and horsewoman has made history after being appointed as the first female crown equerry. Handpicked for the duty by King Charles and Queen Camilla, Col Erica Bridge is due to take up the post in the spring. She succeeds outgoing Col Toby Browne. Currently defence attache at the UK Embassy in Rome, the Royal Artillery stalwart will be responsible for managing the Royal Mews, overseeing all transport for the monarch and his family. And she is no stranger to trailblazing, having become the first female boss of The King's Troop in 2007 (shown).



Picture: Sgt Mick Howard, RLC

IN MEMORIAM

LCpl George Hooley



DIED

DECEMBER 9, 2025

UKRAINE

A TALENTED NCO in The Parachute Regiment has been praised for his “courage and determination” following his death in Eastern Europe.

LCpl George Hooley, who was 28, lost his life following a tragic accident in Ukraine. An MoD statement confirmed he had been observing a new defensive capability away from the front lines when the incident happened.

It has not been confirmed which battalion LCpl Hooley had been serving with. However, the MoD said he enlisted in November 2015, going through the Infantry Training Centre Catterick and completing P Company soon after.

He went on to complete his junior NCO and the section commanders’ battle course with distinction and had been due to promote to corporal this month.

An experienced soldier, he had already deployed to Afghanistan, Africa and Eastern Europe.

His CO, who has not been named, said: “LCpl Hooley’s future within The Parachute Regiment was incredibly bright and I have no doubt he would have continued to perform at the very front of his peer group in the coming years.

“All members of The Parachute Regiment mourn his loss – however, our sorrow is nothing compared to that being felt by his family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them at this incredibly difficult time.”

Speaking in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer paid tribute to the soldier. His service would “never be forgotten,” he said.

The PM added: “His life was full of courage and determination – he served our country with honour and distinction around the world in the name of freedom and democracy, including as part of a small number of British personnel in Ukraine.

“I place his name on record to express our gratitude and respect and affirm his service will never be forgotten.”



AIRDROP AWARD

LOGGIES were rewarded for their actions over war-torn Gaza as RAF Brize Norton received the Firmin Sword of Peace. Troops from 47 Air Despatch Squadron delivered vital airdrops to civilians in 2024. More in *Soldier's* July 2024 issue.

URBAN LEGENDS

CPL Harry Cole (R Yorks) and his pals drew a line under 2025 by putting their combat skills to the test with French troops at Europe's biggest urban complex. Read more on page 26.



Picture: Graeme Main



SIGNALS GIG

REGULARS seeking a new challenge in overseas comms work are being invited to put themselves forward for a career with an interesting Royal Signals sub-unit.

Working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 299 Signal Squadron (Special Communications) is looking for private and NCO transferees up to the rank of sergeant. Those joining will first have to complete the 26-week special communications course.

For more, including details on selection, read [ABN 066/2025](#).

TIME TO TRAIN?

HIGH-CALIBRE junior and senior NCOs, plus warrant officers, are needed to develop incoming troops at bases across the Army Individual Training Command.

Opportunities are available at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst as well as Soldier Academy and University Officers' Training Corps venues.

Those selected attend the defence trainer course. Read [ABN 065/2025](#).

HODGETTS CASE

IN NOVEMBER'S Soldier we covered the sentencing of 25-year-old Pte Samuel Hodgetts (4th Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps) at the Military Court Centre Catterick for four counts of sexual assault.

In the article we stated that the offender, who has since been dismissed from the British Army, was found guilty on "all counts".

However, we have been asked to point out that he was acquitted of four other charges.

Our information is taken from sentencing remarks published on [gov.uk](#) and therefore only includes details of convictions. But we are happy to make this clarification.

MY TOP...

Soldier gets to know
Cpl Harry Connell, R Yorks

...COOKHOUSE

It's got to be the Land Warfare Centre's. It's never let me down.

...TRAINING EXERCISE

The combined arms live-fire phase of Wessex Storm. Because as a forward observer it's great to work with troops on the ground and get the experience of real time movements from the Flot (forward line of own troops).

...ARMY SLANG

Rats! It's just so inclusive to everything you want to complain about. Raining? The weather is rats. Hard exercise? That's definitely rats. Early start on a Monday? That's so rats. Someone's eating pineapple pizza? That's really rats!

...FOREIGN ARMY

Any American call sign I have trained with has been amazing. They love to throw assets into the mix and you get the feeling they want to work hard and be better at what they do. They're always great to work with.

...MUSIC

Any Creed track is perfect.

...RATION PACK ITEM

I would do stag all night for a few more of those vanilla cakes.

...TRAINING AREA

For me, being an observer, it's got to be The Plain – big expansive areas giving me loads of opportunities to prep fire missions.

...ARMY CLICHE FOR THE CHOP

"You're in your own time now" – it doesn't make sense. Hate it. It needs to go.



...BIT OF KIT

NV33 night vision goggles (shown) – they're a game changer

...ADVENTUROUS TRAINING

Some AT feels like just another PT session, but not parachuting. It's a great way of doing something that's challenging, keeps you fit and is really enjoyable at the same time.

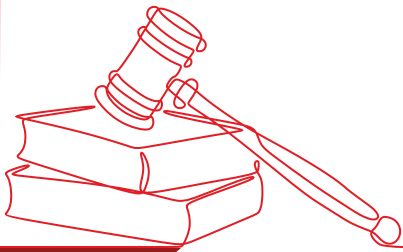


KICKED OUT

THE following personnel were dismissed from His Majesty's Armed Forces following conviction at court martial between July and November 2025:

📄 **Pte Jeffrey Zubayr (156 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps)**, age 53, pleaded guilty to **theft** after stealing nearly £4,400 of kit – including four sets of body armour destined for Ukrainian troops. Sentenced to eight months' imprisonment suspended for 21 months on condition he completes 180 hours of unpaid work.

📄 **Capt Colin Vella (Military Provost Staff Regiment)**, age 45, pleaded guilty to **fraud**. The charge relates to a £33,269 claim for the continuity of education allowance to which he was not entitled. Sentenced to 14 months' imprisonment, suspended for 21 months and ordered to complete 240 hours of unpaid work.



📄 **LCpl Donovan Howard (30 Signal Regiment)**, age 26, pleaded guilty to **voyeurism** plus three charges relating to the sending of **malicious and indecent communications** and two counts of **disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind**. Sentenced to 14 months' imprisonment, plus a five-year sexual harm prevention order, including restrictions on his social media and internet use.

📄 **Pte Samuel Clark**, age 20, pleaded guilty to **disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind** following his behaviour on exercise as a phase one recruit. Ordered to complete 180 hours' unpaid work and up to 25 rehabilitative activity days. Also ordered to pay £800 in compensation to his victim.

📄 **Pte Jordan Hammond**, age 22, was convicted of four counts of **disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind** and two counts of **conduct prejudicial to good**

order and service discipline. His conviction follows poor standards of behaviour towards fellow recruits in phase one training and he was sentenced to 300 hours' unpaid work and up to 15 rehabilitative activity requirement days.

📄 **Kgn Christopher Green (1st Battalion, The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment)**, age 23, pleaded guilty to **unlawful wounding** following an attack on a soldier after an alcohol-fuelled social outing while based in Cyprus. Sentenced to 13 months' detention at the Military Corrective Training Centre Colchester.

📄 **Spr Harry Peters (42 Engineer Regiment)**, age 27, pleaded guilty to **fighting and assault occasioning actual bodily harm** after an altercation at a halloween party. Sentenced to 30 weeks of service detention.

To read the full transcripts of the sentencing remarks in the above cases log on to gov.uk/government/publications/military-court-service-sentencing-remarks-2025



NEW YEAR GLOW UP?

Pictures: Shutterstock

FED up of wall-to-wall magnolia in your army pad?

Thanks to a recent change in policy, those living in service families accommodation now have a new palette to pick from – and best of all, you won't have to repaint it when you move out.

In a move aimed at giving

occupants more freedom to personalise their homes, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has introduced a range of neutral shades including light greens and grey.

Previously, personnel were permitted to decorate their quarter in any colour as long as they

returned it to magnolia or white upon posting. But they can now leave walls in approved tones.

Work must be carried out to a high standard, however, or you could find yourself with extra charges when marching out.

These tips from defencehomes.mod.gov.uk will help you get the best results. Visit the website to download the full palette.

Before you start clean surfaces, fill and sand holes and cover fittings, floors and furniture.

Vinyl matt is ideal for walls and ceilings, while vinyl silk is better for high moisture areas like kitchens and bathrooms.

Cut-in edges first with a brush, then use a roller for the main area.

Keep a wet edge to avoid streaks and apply two thin coats, allowing full drying between them.

Keep leftover paint for future touch-ups and label the tins.

THAT'S A WRAP

PROUD officer cadets put on a show to remember at the latest Sovereign's Parade at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, marking the end of 44 weeks of hard graft.



Picture: Graeme Main



Pictures: Beth Proddger

INNOVATION STATION

Lt Col Ben Irwin-Clark



INFANTEERS have rolled up their sleeves to create a no-cost drone flying facility at their home base.

Lt Col Ben Irwin-Clark, CO of 1st Battalion, Irish Guards, told *Soldier* his troops had pieced together the hub at their Aldershot camp using kit donations from friends in the tech industry.

They also called on the specialist skills of their own personnel, such as a computer

building hobbyist.

Located in Mons Barracks, the set-up includes a room with a 3D printer, various repair apparatus and first-person view (FPV) drone simulator software.

Next door, a hangar has been transformed into a close-quarters battle zone (shown) where UAS can be flown or Airsoft games played – including in downtime.

A guardsman's old car destined for scrap, and unwanted nets from south coast fishermen, were among the other items gathered.

"The only thing that cost anything was the £16 clock on the wall," the officer said.

The Micks – experts in infantry combat including anti-tank warfare and reconnaissance – have been working hard to integrate drones following a stint on Operation Interflex last year.

Lt Col Irwin-Clark said his troops' willingness to embrace new tech had been "unreal" following the time they spent with Ukrainian FPV pilots.

"I used to walk my spaniel on our training area in the evenings and look up to see our young people in their windows, headphones on and gaming. I

would think 'shame' – but now I think 'great, I need you to use those skills to get your 60 hours of online flying'.

"At the start of Interflex we had ten or 15 qualified UAS pilots – and now that's nearer 70.

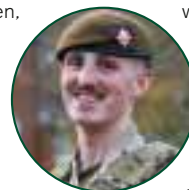
"There are 276 people in this unit – so around 25 per cent of us are qualified."

As well as getting hours clocked on the simulator, the hub allows new parts to be printed with ease. This means troops can hammer time in the CQB area without fear of broken kit halting proceedings.

Gdsm Luke Heffernan (left) said the doorstep facility was helping him adjust to new tactics fast.

"We have to be so different now in terms of how we move," he said. "It's a new challenge completely. With drones you can always be seen – there's no hiding."

The CO added: "The Guards are at the forefront of modernisation, and it pleases me a unit sometimes thought of as terribly stuffy is actually at the vanguard. We're not finding much pushback, either. For the first time in 20 years, little is being chucked in my way in terms of policy etc."



LEVEL PEAKS



HEAVISIDE

MOTIF



Real-time situational awareness for every warfighter



Passive RF situational awareness for threats between 5 MHz - 6 GHz



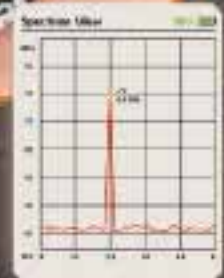
Rugged, portable design with robust antenna swapouts



Vibrations for discreet notifications and night mode for covert operations



Signal Type	Strength	Age
108 MHz	100%	0
210 MHz	100%	0
218 MHz	100%	0
240 MHz	100%	0
1.87 GHz US	100%	0



Always Delivering the Advantage

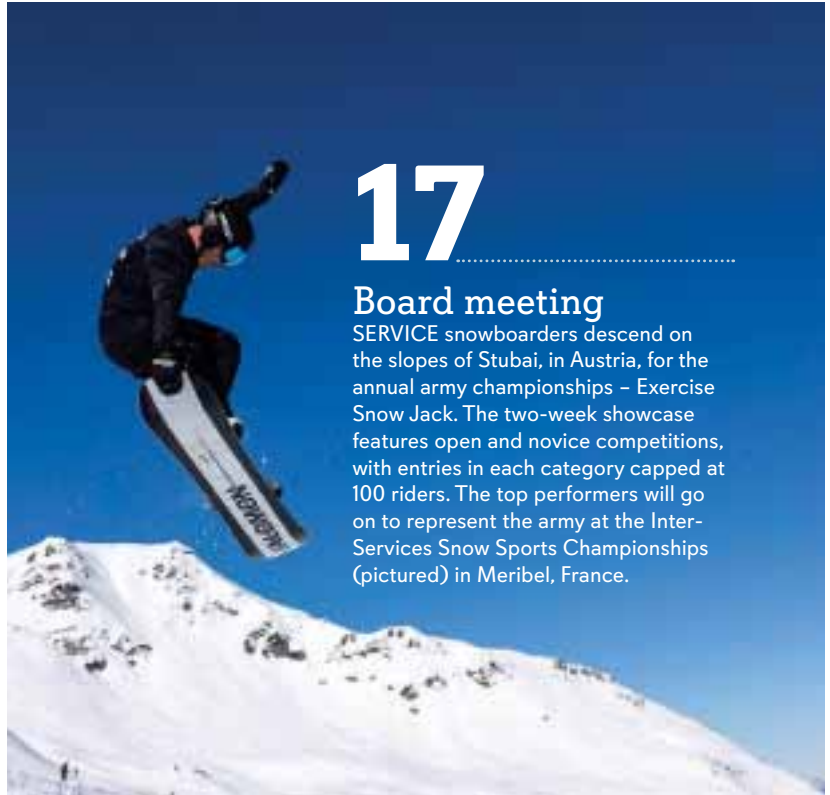


diary dates

1

Map the past

IF JANUARY is boring you already, why not sign up to the Army Benevolent Fund's historical code-breaking challenge. *Operation Bletchley: Berlin* sees participants crack ten codes over 40 miles – wherever they happen to be based – before the end of the month. With three levels to choose from, you can join the fundraiser for £15 and even link it to your fitness tracker. To sign up visit the 'challenges' section of events.armybenevolentfund.org



17

Board meeting

SERVICE snowboarders descend on the slopes of Stubai, in Austria, for the annual army championships – Exercise Snow Jack. The two-week showcase features open and novice competitions, with entries in each category capped at 100 riders. The top performers will go on to represent the army at the Inter-Services Snow Sports Championships (pictured) in Meribel, France.

Picture: Cpl Lauren Brown, RAF

20

Winter AV summit

THE 26th annual International Armoured Vehicles Conference at the Farnborough International Exhibition Centre will run for three days, with attendees from more than 60 Nato and partner nations. This year's agenda will include discussions around Ukraine and how forces can adapt to the changing nature of warfare. It will deliver a blend of briefs, panels and workshops on subjects such as counter-UAS and active protection systems, and speakers will include Scott Milne, vice president and general manager of UK operations for General Dynamics. Register via defenceiq.com/events



28

Court date

THE first major tennis event of 2026 takes place in Aldershot as players head to the court for the Army Indoor Championships.



Picture: Cat Coryn



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kit



Maul Evac UGV

Top speed: 43 mph

Spec: Metal wheels do not contain air, designed to withstand mines and rough terrain

Cost: Around £15,000 each

Range: Up to 150km on hard surfaces and 100km off-road

ROBOT RESCUE

THIS may look like a coffin on wheels but it's an unmanned ground vehicle (UGV) designed to protect soldiers who are still alive and kicking.

Designed by Ukraine's First Separate Medical Battalion with Ukrainian manufacturer DevDroid, the platform

demonstrated how far this technology has come when it was used to rescue an injured Ukrainian soldier stranded around 30 kilometres behind Russian lines.

He'd been isolated for a month with a shattered foot and food and water had been delivered via aerial drones.

The six-hour mission, detailed in the battalion's official social media channels, saw the Maul Evac UGV dispatched to bring him in, but it rolled over an anti-personnel mine halfway there, blasting off one of its wheels.

However, the platform remained controllable and the operators carried on with

their task.

When the UGV reached the casualty, he climbed into its armoured casket, a feature that would go on to save him on the long return journey.

It suffered direct hits from a Russian drone attack but the UGV's armour withstood the blasts and saved the soldier's life.

When the platform reached Ukrainian-controlled territory, medics provided first aid and stabilised the wounded man, who has since had his limb amputated and is undergoing rehabilitation in Kyiv.

It suffered a direct hit from a Russian drone attack but the armour withstood the blast and saved the soldier's life



Picture: Graeme Main

AJAX PROBE CONTINUES

THE safety of soldiers is the MoD's top priority, Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry Luke Pollard has stressed.

It follows a pause in all training, exercises and trials for the Ajax armoured fighting vehicle after noise and vibration injuries to troops on Exercise Titan Storm.

As this magazine went to press shortly before Christmas, the politician confirmed that probes by the Defence Accident Investigation Branch and the Army Safety Investigation Team were ongoing, as well as a ministerial review.

"The teams are conducting their work thoroughly and at pace and they must be given the time and space required to ensure that all information and evidence is considered," he said – adding that the

23 vehicles involved in the exercise had undergone further inspections, the outcome of which would be reported in the New Year.

"I met with General Dynamics last week and I continue to have regular meetings with the chief of the general staff, the army and officials," Pollard added.

"As I told Parliament last week, it is unacceptable for the safety of our personnel to be at risk."

'Investigation teams are conducting their work thoroughly and at pace'



Picture: Graeme Main

● ARMY chief Gen Sir Roly Walker was given a whistlestop tour of the updated kit being used by 11 Brigade on a visit to Aldershot. He also rounded off 2025 with a 'tech terrain walk' in Reading with senior officers to learn how the latest AI can support the service. Organisers are considering further events this year to brief even more personnel.

Q&A

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Troops tell *Soldier* what's at the top of their wishlist in 2026...



"IN terms of stuff I want, it has to be a handstand walk ramp – a piece of kit that's helpful for athletes improving their agility skills or preparing for events such as Crossfit. Having just competed in the British Army Warrior Fitness competition (*Soldier*, December), I've had my eye on these and will definitely be getting one this year."

Pte Joshua Greenfield, R Yorks



"TOP of the list for me is a K25 Mohican folding knife – it might sound simple, but it's a fundamental tool, crucial to survival and army life. I've been looking at my equipment more generally as I'm changing unit and cap badge this year – heading off to 131 Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers."

Cpl Mark Bailey, AGC (RMP)



"I NEED a watch – specifically a Garmin Fenix 7 Solar – in preparation for a deployment to Kenya in the autumn. It charges with the sun, offers enhanced battery life, and will also support my training for the Manchester Marathon in April."

Capt Conor Paterson, Lancs



phys

Q&A

MY WORKOUT

CAPTAIN Lucy Hammett (RAMS) recently became the first female doctor to pass P Company – the infamous selection course that’s a rite of passage for airborne personnel. Soldier grilled the 26-year-old on how she trained for the challenge...

Why did you put yourself forward?

I work with a lot of airborne personnel in the 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team and felt I’d be doing myself a disservice if I didn’t try.

What was your phys routine like prior?

I started getting really into fitness a few years ago so already trained six-to-eight times a week – two or three strength-focused days, alternating upper and lower body, plus three or four runs, as well as two or three Hyrox sessions.

How did that change once you’d applied?

Tabbing was a big area of weakness for me, so I dialled back the running and started working on that, building up from carrying 10kg to 17kg. I also focused my strength training more on injury prevention – as a doctor I was aware of the types of injuries people tend to get on P Company.

Was there any point during P Company that you worried about failing?

Every single day. It felt like such a huge thing. So I chose to take it week by week and test by test rather than thinking of it as a whole.

What was the most challenging part?

Definitely the tabbing, in particular the ‘Paras’ Ten’ which is a ten-mile route with lots of hills that you have to finish in under 1hr 50min.

How did you fuel your body?

I had to up my calorie intake massively to the point where I struggled to eat enough so I also used high-energy protein shakes and bars alongside four big meals a day.

Did you feel added pressure as a woman?

There were four women on the course and we did stand out, but I didn’t feel like I had anything to prove other than to myself.

How did it feel to pass?

There was a massive sense of relief. I am extremely proud of myself because it’s a big achievement and I went into it not knowing whether I would be successful.

Any advice for others?

I wish I’d done more hill training. But the other thing I would say to women specifically is not to be put off by potentially being the only female on the course. We’re in the double digits now for women who have passed and it would be great if that became a normal thing, not worthy of comment.

P Company test week

THIS features eight assessments, including **three timed marches** up to 20 miles and carrying 17kg; the **trainasium** aerial confidence course; **log race** (1.9 miles); **steeplechase** (1.8-mile obstacle course in 19min); **stretcher race** (five-mile team event); and **milling** (boxing-style fight).



Picture: Graeme Main



3 tips for finding New Year motivation

IT'S that time of year, when new fitness goals are set and motivation kicks back in – often slowly. King's Royal Hussars PTI Sgt Shannon Gee (AGC (SPS)) has the following words of wisdom for anyone getting back to business or looking to fight the festive flab.

1 SET ACHIEVABLE GOALS

If you aim too high, too fast, it can hit your enthusiasm from the start.

2 CREATE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Is now the time to take on that thing you've been mulling over for months?

3 SIGN UP TO A RUN OR FITNESS EVENT

Check out local events, or the bigger challenges from charities like the Army Benevolent Fund or SSAFA.

SOLDIER asked the PTI...

What's your own goal for '26?

To improve our unit's mixed doubles Hyrox time. This year we finished in **1hr 5min 4sec** but next year we're aiming to go sub 60min. Having an event booked keeps me motivated and gives me a clear target to train towards.



GURKHAS KILL IT

A YEAR on from passing the rigorous selection process in their home country, 274 ultra fit Nepalese recruits have sailed through basic training and are now moving on to the next stage in their careers.

Graduating from Catterick's Gurkha Training Company with an impressive 100 per cent success rate, they will now join The Royal Gurkha Rifles or begin trade courses.

Thanks to the gruelling test phase in Pokhara, the pass-out stats for Nepalese personnel are consistently twice as high as their British counterparts.

Alongside other physical challenges, candidates must complete the infamous Doko Race – a 5.5km uphill slog carrying a basket loaded with 25kg of sand – in less than 43 minutes.



Picture: Cpl Paul Squires, RLC



Picture: Shutterstock

SPORTS BRAS – DON'T HOLD BACK

SERVICEWOMEN are being reminded they can claim £50 per year towards sports bras amid poor take-up of the grant.

Only around 20 per cent of female soldiers have made use of the cash in the year since the policy was announced.

Regulars and reserves are eligible for the funding, which they can recoup via JPA once they have purchased a garment.

Troops are encouraged to use a fitting service to ensure appropriate support for all levels of physical activity and they must retain receipts for auditing purposes.

For full details and instructions on how to claim read **ABN 061/2025**.

Picture: Graeme Main

career



JUMP IN CAPABILITY

OPPORTUNITIES are in the pipeline for airborne personnel this year as the service looks to develop its own contingent of army parachute jump instructors.

Open to lance corporals and corporals who have completed P Company and the basic parachute course, the job will see them training troops from across the 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team for their specialist role.

A small number of soldiers have served as instructors at the Airborne Delivery Wing at RAF Brize Norton for the last ten years, but bosses say formally establishing the army capability will increase capacity and boost the number of trained personnel for front-line units.

Further details on recruitment will be released in the coming months.

Picture: Cpl Aaron Stone, RLC

Q&A

NEW YEAR, NEW START

AS THE latest batch of recruits arrive for basic training in Pirbright, we asked future signaller **Emily Burrows** why she picked an army career...

Had you always wanted to be a soldier?

No, not at all. If you'd have told me even about three years ago that I'd be joining, I wouldn't have believed it. But I started to make friends who are in the military and hearing their stories made me think, 'oh, I'd really enjoy that'.

Why didn't it appeal initially?

No one in my family had served and if you



don't know anyone who's in, you don't really understand what the military is about. I thought you'd just be going to war the whole time, but obviously that's not the case. I didn't realise it was more about keeping fit, travelling and getting lots of qualifications. There are just so many benefits.

Why the Royal Signals?

It just seemed interesting. I worked in a pharmacy so originally I thought of the Royal Army Medical Service but I decided to go and do something completely different.

How did you find the joining process?

Quite slow. By the time I start basic training it will be almost a year since I applied. The medical stuff takes quite a long time. But if it's something you want to do, then you should stick with it.



DREAM JOB IN YOUR SIGHTS?

Bag the posting you want by nailing the ePPP

IF YOU'VE been promoted or are approaching the end of your current assignment you'll need to complete an electronic posting preference proforma (ePPP). Accessible via Lums on Modnet or the Career Management Portal on the Defence Gateway, it's crucial to fill it out properly if you want to secure your role of choice. Check out these pointers from **Sgt Cam Eden (RLC)**, known to his YouTube followers as the Savvy Squaddie...

Don't leave the My Profile box blank

This is important because it could mean the difference between getting the job you want and it going to someone else who took the time to fill it out. It's where you give the board an overview of your long-term aspirations, location preferences, domestic considerations and other factors. Use the 2,000-character limit to clearly and concisely showcase who you are.

Use Word to draft your input

There is no spell-checker in the portal, so to avoid errors, copy and paste from Word. The last thing you want is spelling or grammatical mistakes when you are trying to sell yourself.

Narrow down your selection with the filter function

When you click on the 'job applications' tab, all of the available positions will come up. The filter allows you to highlight the roles or locations that interest you. Give the ones you fancy a thumbs-up to create a shortlist – this doesn't mean you have applied yet.

Don't just apply for one role if there are several similar ones at a unit

Just because you've applied for one, doesn't mean you'll automatically be considered for all of them.

Understand the preference options

Once you click apply, three boxes pop up. The first is the preference – whether the job is your first, second or third choice and so on. Underneath that you can rate your level of interest – either 'would love', 'wouldn't mind' or 'not preferred'. For example, your number one choice would be first and 'would love'. You should only use 'not preferred' if you have been told that you need to put certain jobs down but they don't interest you.

Sell yourself in the notes section

Why would you be the best fit for that position? Start with a BLUF (bottom line up front), then list your knowledge, skills, experience and behaviours (KSEB) – backing up what you say with relevant qualifications and annual reports. Don't copy and paste for each job you're applying for. Make life easy for the board by keeping the layout and structure clean. Remember, you are competing for these jobs against other personnel.

Scores aren't everything

Don't be disheartened if you didn't place highly on the promotion board – you just need to bring something else to the table in the form of KSEB to set you apart from the rest. If you are after a specific job in future, have a chat with your careers officer so they can assist you with getting the right qualifications.

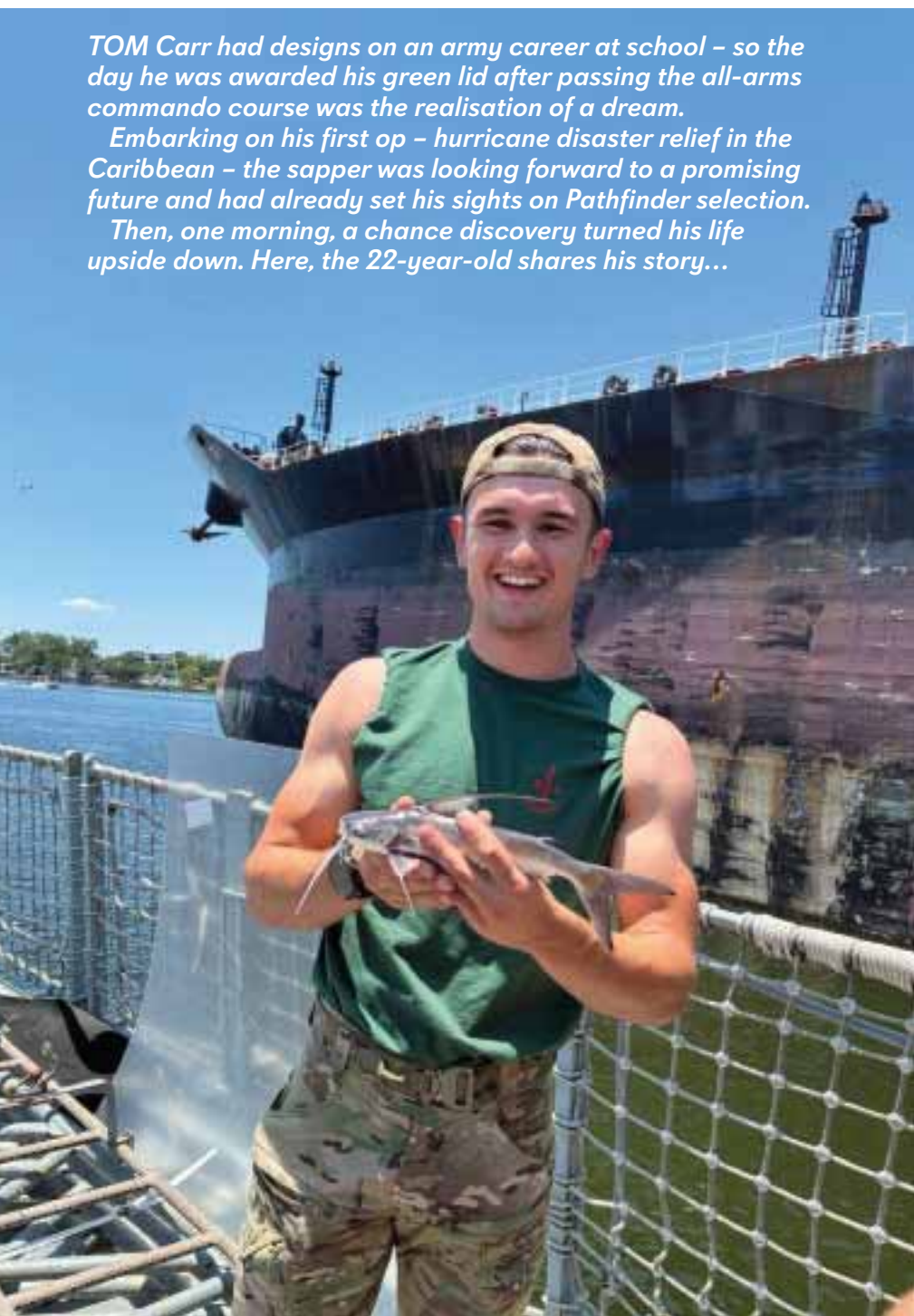
health

IN COMBAT WITH CANCER

TOM Carr had designs on an army career at school – so the day he was awarded his green lid after passing the all-arms commando course was the realisation of a dream.

Embarking on his first op – hurricane disaster relief in the Caribbean – the sapper was looking forward to a promising future and had already set his sights on Pathfinder selection.

Then, one morning, a chance discovery turned his life upside down. Here, the 22-year-old shares his story...



JUST six months ago I was living my best life – working as a joiner and enjoying life with 24 Commando Royal Engineers.

I was in Florida preparing for six months on a disaster relief deployment, and after that I should have been heading off to Norway, doing a diving course then maybe going for Pathfinder selection.

Then one night I was in the shower and found a lump in my left testicle.

'I'll get that checked when I get back in December,' I thought to myself.

Still, it played on my mind and by pure chance I saw the ship's doctor the next day.

He examined me and said I needed to go to a hospital on the mainland.

On the Wednesday I was in a Tampa medical centre and that night I called my mum, Victoria, to tell her.

She's a primary school headteacher in civvy life and a reservist lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps; along with my sister, she's one of my best mates.

Thursday brought more tests and I was told I needed to come back with the ship's doctor.

Deep down I think I knew where this was all heading, although the last thing I'd honestly ever expected to be contemplating was a cancer diagnosis.

But I heard the C word at 1000 on Friday morning and was told I'd be flown home over the weekend.

I called mum and almost cried but mostly I was in shock, trying to focus.

I landed at Heathrow on the Saturday. A mate, who was duty driver that day, picked me up from the airport and took me over to





Far left **Spr Tom Carr on deployment**
Left **Undergoing treatment** Right **With mum Lt Victoria Carr (Int Corps) after finishing chemo and, below, in uniform**



TOP COVER

LIEUTENANT Victoria Carr admitted being terrified by her son's diagnosis – but said she was determined to stay strong and has praised medics for their swift response.

Hearing the news down the phone, the Intelligence Corps officer and civvy street headteacher added: "I remember my stomach flipping, my breath catching and having to steady my voice.

"In the days that followed, my life became split into compartments – headteacher, soldier, mother, carer. In the mornings I'd be interviewing, managing my school's expansion, creating policies and reviewing reports; by afternoon I was navigating oncology referrals, family support for Tom and post-op care.

"You learn that resilience isn't about never breaking; it's refusing to stay broken, making sense of what has happened, learning from it and sharing that with others."



Devon where mum was waiting. She hid her worry behind jokes and small talk, laughing inappropriately about my nuts.

The next day, our MO explained that I'd hear from a hospital closer to my home in the north-west. As he signed me off indefinitely, it hit – no work, no purpose, no tour, no plan.

The next week was a whirlwind – seeing a urologist, scans, blood tests and trips to the sperm bank in case treatment made me infertile. Then there was the surgery to remove the testicle.

Two weeks later, mum and I sat in urology to hear the biopsy results.

My cancer was rare and aggressive, and my blood markers were still high, so clinicians ordered a CT scan to check for spread.

There was three weeks of waiting, which was hard. I was angry at times. I would snap at mum and then apologise. My mates Facetimed and I loved it, but then I'd spiral, seething that a single shower could change everything.

I was threaders, desperate to get back to full fitness and work.

At the oncology appointment there was good news. The cancer was at stage one, meaning it was localised to the testicle. They would do one round of chemo but otherwise I should be okay.

The doctor said the decision to get the lump checked had probably saved my life.

Had I left it until Christmas, I might not be here now.

Mum asked the questions, I simply asked if I could have sex – she rolled her eyes. But sex is important to people, especially when you've got cancer in your junk!

I had to wait – you can't have chemo until six weeks after surgery to give your body a chance to recover.

But we were booked into the Clatterbridge Cancer Hospital, Liverpool where I would be an inpatient for four days.

I can't really describe what was going

through my mind when we arrived. The chemo I had was called BEP – Google it and you'll find it's not pleasant.

It has loads of potential side effects and the first chemical assault didn't finish until the next day.

Back home, I was sick as a dog.

I grizzed it out, but it was rubbish. The other sessions were just as awful. And then there was the bell you ring after the last one. The day I rang it, there was a lad on the day ward who had come in with a sore throat to be told he had stage four lymphoma.

He was 24 and had just bought a house with his girlfriend. Mum and I looked at one another – she was close to tears.

Back on the work front, a couple of other plans had been upended – I was told there would be absolutely no diving, nor jumping from high altitude, for a year. The B in BEP – Bleomycin – leaves your lungs wrecked and they need to recover.

But a few tests and a CT scan later showed I was clear.

I'll need three-monthly blood tests and six-monthly scans for the next five years but for now, I am good to go.

As I write this, it'll be another two weeks before I can start my phased return to work. I can't wait and have my eye on supporting the next bunch of commando engineers on their beat-up course to ease me back in.

I know I'm one of the blessed; that there are thousands of people with cancer who are not so lucky.

It has been a long and difficult journey, full of emotions for me and my family. I am so glad I flagged up the lump early and allowed the medical chain to kick in.

So my call to arms is this – lads or lasses, please check yourselves, and get checked if you are not happy.

And this applies to wherever you happen to be, and whatever you are doing in the world.

FAIL LEARN WIN

THIS mantra was ringing in the ears of troops from 1st Battalion, The Royal Yorkshire Regiment as they honed their urban skills in less-than-ideal circumstances across the Channel in France.

A late-notice invitation to train with the French Foreign Legion's 13 Demi-Brigade at the Centre d'Entrainement aux Actions en Zone Urbaine (Cenzub) came after another unit was forced to pull out.

But it created some logistical headaches for the Brits.

Last-minute urban combat 'brush-up' training had to be squeezed in at Whinny Hill in Catterick before the personnel travelled over the water.

And not all the supporting engineers, artillery, reconnaissance and medical elements that would ideally be employed to assist a company-sized formation were available at such short notice.

A more surprising drawback, though, cropped up with the light mechanised infantry unit's Foxhound vehicles, which were temporarily taken out of action across the army due to a technical glitch.

As a result, the Royal Yorks had to undertake Exercise Gaulish purely as a dismounted force and somehow work out how to slot into a highly mobile French armoured infantry formation.

However, mindful of the fact that real conflict nearly always throws up the unexpected, the Brits were quick to recognise the value in training around these restrictions.

"We would normally have a combined arms company group with us, but we still managed to extract lots of good things out of this package," Maj Robert Loudon (R Yorks) told *Soldier*.

"The realities of war mean we need to >>



Right **The in-house op for troops advance using an AMX-30 tank as cover**

Below **The Royal Yorks resisted hard and learnt lots of lessons along the way**

IN NUMBERS:
Cenzub, France

400

Soldiers and civvies employed at the site

2004

Year it was created

6,000

Area in hectares

63

Houses in the training village of Beausejour

5,000

Inhabitants the town of Jeoffrecourt was designed for



‘This has given us an appreciation of the different way the French defend’

Cpl Harry Connell, R Yorks





» practise the basics and use our initiative to work around problems that come out of nowhere.”

The two-week exercise started with getting to understand French infantry techniques and procedures and honing low-level urban combat drills – a process that highlighted major contrasts between the two nations.

“The French place more emphasis on fighting from armoured vehicles – BTRs and Griffons mainly – and it took time for us to work out how we, as a dismounted light mech company, could best work with them in urban areas,” said Sgt Louis Jones (R Yorks).

“Timing was crucial as we normally tab into an objective, but they drive very fast up to the building to prevent their vehicles becoming easy targets.”

The differences in approaches to urban warfare did not end there.

“This has given us an appreciation of the different way the French defend,” explained Cpl Harry Connell (R Yorks)

“We hold onto a position as long as we can, fight hard, and if we drop back we do it slowly with replenished sections rotating in to maintain the pressure on the enemy.

“But the French, through operations in places such as Mali, only conduct a light defence of the building they are holding and then pull back because they can then watch the enemy clear it and gather intel to increase their chances of a successful counter-attack.

“They also believe if you fight too hard the enemy will withdraw, call in fires on you and then come again.”

Working under the host nation’s command, the joint force was given a shake-out during the final phase of the exercise, focusing on assaults on two urban conurbations – Beausejour, a small rural training village, and Jeoffrecourt, a town five kilometres up

the road featuring a mock main square, train station, canal, residential housing, industrial area and high-rises.

The British contingent coordinated attacks and defensive manoeuvres with their parent Foreign Legion battlegroup against an in-house ‘enemy’ who knew Cenzub intimately and were furnished with superior equipment. And it was here that the failures started to mount up while the learning curve steepened.

“Being light mech, we’re usually expected to fight against dismounts so we have a natural advantage,” said LCpl Alfie Keep (R Yorks). “But we were up against an opfor equipped with light armoured vehicles and even tanks.

“Not only that, but we were using old French Famas rifles with just iron sights, while they had the newer HK416 weapons and thermal and optical sights.

“We wouldn’t normally be put up against such an opponent without more support, so you could argue this is an unlikely scenario, but things will go wrong in a real war and this has been an important experience for us.

“What would we do in a future battle if command mismatched us against an enemy formation due to failures in intelligence or planning? How would we cope?”

Royal Yorks personnel now know the answer to that a lot better than before.

As their sections were pushed back through the streets of Jeoffrecourt, they practised tactics for neutralising armour in confined areas using the French weaponry they’d been issued with.

“We’d normally operate with anti-tank and reconnaissance screens in front of us but we didn’t have those,” said Cpl Connell. “So we adapted and explored how to use the French AT4 anti-armour weapons, getting them into the correct places and working out how to create kill boxes using the buildings as cover.

“It worked well, although we’d normally have engineers with us creating the obstacles to channel the armoured vehicles.

“But even so, as a light mech outfit we rarely get to do this sort of thing so it’s been great for expanding our knowledge of this type of warfare despite losing the battle.

“We’ve learnt a lot.”

The Brits did enjoy the taste of victory at the smaller training village of Beausejour where, amid a mock CBRN attack, intense house-to-house battles played to the



Unique site

CENZUB is the largest and best equipped urban warfare facility in Europe.

Regular exercises there are the result of a special Franco-British agreement called the Lancaster House Treaty, which celebrated its 15th birthday last year.

Under this accord, two British companies are invited to train at the facility every year to share skills and knowledge as well as strengthening bilateral relations and combined warfighting capabilities.

Inside, its buildings are rigged with sound effects, smoke machines on every floor and sensors and cameras for producing detailed after-action reviews.

Hundreds of soldiers and civilians are employed there, with in-house opposing forces structured as a mixed company kitted out with engineers, infantry and platforms such as Griffon, BTR and AMX-30 tanks. This unit is able to play the role of a combat formation, militia or civilian refugees, depending on what’s required.



Below **British troops lure enemy armour into a 'kill box'** Bottom **Ex Gaulish provided a valuable opportunity to conduct building clearances in CBRN gear**



‘Doing this sort of thing in full CBRN gear is very rare’

LCpl Alfie Keep, R Yorks

» strengths of the visitors, who'd earlier prepared well at Whinny Hill's close quarters combat hangar.

“We went into Beausejour aggressively because the intelligence picture was good and suggested we could do that,” said LCpl Keep.

“We'd been pushed out of the village initially, got gassed and were then tasked with retaking it.

“Doing this sort of thing in full CBRN gear is very rare - I've only done it once before.

“It's difficult to see with masks on, and comms are challenging but once inside buildings, we did well, checking corners and entering rooms in a good way.

“For most of the soldiers it was the first time they'd tried to conduct an urban fight with respirators on so, in light of what's currently going on in the world, it was a hugely valuable experience.”

The sheer size and quality of Cenzub tested other aspects of their urban skills too, noted Maj Loudon.

“The scale of the place allows you to practise assessing situational awareness in large and complex areas, gauge what capabilities are coming to face you, and test how you deal with them,” he added. “It's hard to do that in the UK. The facilities we have are not as good as this and we have been busy with Op Interflex, among other things.

“Communications across such a large area was a challenge - the company defensive plan requiring sections and platoons to be



interlinked to provide mutual support.

“Then on attacks, we need to maintain momentum and this exercise reinforced just how important having good comms is for that as well.

“We need to know which sections are approaching which buildings and sections must provide detailed descriptions of buildings and streets so fire support can be provided where it's needed.

“That was really good practice as it's hard enough to do during the day, but we've also been doing it at night and that makes it even

more challenging.”

As demanding as Exercise Gaulish was on several fronts, the Yorkshiremen wrung every last ounce of training value out, adapting and learning from their mistakes, honing urban fighting skills and increasing their knowledge of a major allied nation's tactics and techniques.

If the balloon ever goes up, it is just this kind of knowhow that will make a vital difference for British troops against a foe that has already shown itself to be almost impossible to predict. <<

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WEEKS of preparation paid off for the Grenadier Guards last month as they delivered an impressive ceremonial welcome to the President and First Lady of Germany at Windsor Castle. Picture: Cpl Danielle Dawson, RLC



ROCK FORMATION

London Guards head to
Gibraltar for annual training test





Report: Richard Long Pictures: Graeme Main, Beth Prodger

A

VOICEOVER artist and theatre stage manager in his day job, Gdsm Rory Jakeman is telling *Soldier* how deploying to Gibraltar has helped him forge a strong bond with his fellow reservists when sudden gunfire cuts the conversation dead.

A patrol has stumbled across an enemy position on the perimeter of the Buffadero training village and his section rush to offer support.

It has been a similar situation for the past 36 hours as the London Guards face a scenario in which a free-thinking proxy force is hell-bent on disrupting strategic national infrastructure.

Fighting has been conducted in the thick vegetation surrounding the buildings as well as in the urban environment itself, while a network of subterranean corridors and disused military storerooms has added to the complexity of the battlespace.

And the threat has been ever present – both day and night.

Once our visit concludes the enemy is set to withdraw to Gibraltar's famed tunnel systems to target data storage hubs and the

guardsmen will be charged with flushing them out.

This will be conducted in a one-and-a-half-kilometre tunnel that will later have its power cut – meaning those at the sharp end will rely on night optical devices to help get the job done.

The serials come in the second week of their annual training package – the first of which included adventurous training and historical tours – and has seen two companies deploy at the tail end of a busy year.

Ceremonial duties formed the primary focus for a large chunk of 2025 as two half-companies were involved in the King's Birthday Parade. Another cohort also participated in the state visits of the President of the United States and the French President. And, in a first for the battalion, two guardsmen had the honour of being on guard at Buckingham Palace.

"We have had the most amazing year," says Commanding Officer Lt Col Russell Lewis (pictured right), who served as a regular >>



Below **London Guards personnel extract casualties from the battle at the Buffadero training village**
Below right **LCpl Reuben Kanill clears a subterranean corridor**



‘This has been some of the hardest training our soldiers have done’





‘You rely on others’

Name: Gdsm Rory Jakeman

Length of service: Five years

Day job: Voiceover artist and theatre stage manager

Why did you join?

I have family ties. My great-grandfather was in the army, and I have a cousin who served in Afghanistan with The Royal Green Jackets. I wanted the challenge of trying something new and it is completely at the other end of the spectrum when compared to the events world.

Describe your highlights to date.

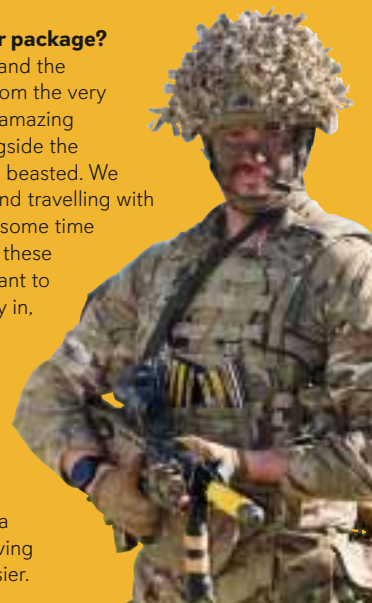
I did Ex Wessex Storm with the Scots Guards in 2023 and have taken part in Trooping the Colour and the Lord Mayor’s Show. There is a good balance between the ceremonial and green sides. Also, in my day job, I was a stage manager for *VE Day 80: The Party* at the Royal Albert Hall, so it was nice to mix both worlds. The fact it was such an important anniversary added to the appeal – it was one of my highlights of the year.

How have you found the Gibraltar package?

The adventurous training was great and the historical tour, looking at Gibraltar from the very start of the Peninsular Wars, offered amazing detail. It was great to have that alongside the green training – nobody wants to be beasted. We all work hard and I’m often abroad and travelling with my job, so it has been good to have some time to develop our cohesion. I’ve known these guys for a few years, and it is important to have the experience regulars get day in, day out.

What lessons have you learned?

You realise how much you rely on the other blokes to get you through. As a civilian I am self-employed, but here we are working in a team, section or platoon and you must be a cohesive unit. It can be grim, but having your friends around you makes it easier.



» in The Parachute Regiment for 20 years and was awarded the Military Cross for leadership and gallantry in Afghanistan in 2008.

“It was our biggest ceremonial contribution, and that was our priority. Now we are focusing on the green side, and it is important we do not let those skills fade.

“Every other year we get an overseas exercise and this time round we were given Gibraltar. Most of us have not been here before and it is both a brilliant and unique area.

“Yes, it is small, but with some creative thinking we can do incredible training.

“I want these to be realistic serials. We had six people deploy on the last Estonian rotation and they weren’t doing made-up scenarios out there.

“Everything being based on countering the Russian threat has made us sharpen our focus, and hopefully we can demonstrate to London District, and the wider army, what we can offer.

“This has been some of the hardest training our soldiers have done. On a normal weekend, they are in and out in two days, so this is about how to keep going.

“We want to create a learning environment. Running around bellowing at people does not work; we are able to point out what they did wrong and how they should do things – and these soldiers are quick learners.

“Nothing here is a test.”

Fortunately, the London Guards boast a healthy cohort of ex-regulars with vast experience to impart.

Capt Jordan Whiteman (pictured right), company commander of G Company, served for eight-and-a-half years with the First Fusiliers before leaving in February. He attended his first drill night with his new reserve unit the very next day.

The 30-year-old has previously deployed to Canada, Estonia and Kosovo, as well as serving on Op Interflex, but this is his first time in Gibraltar.

“The biggest point everyone has observed is how quickly the terrain transitions,” he explains.

»



‘Everyone has a part to play’

Name: Gdsm Tiggy Stockbridge **Age:** 23

Length of service: Four years

Day job: Medical student based at various London hospitals

What was your motivation for serving?

I wanted to get more experience before joining the regular army. From May, I will be a mental health nurse in the Royal Army Medical Service, so I wanted to know what it is like as a soldier.

How have you found the training here?

We walked up to the area and started taking casualties almost immediately and that made you realise how quickly you could be taken out and how important medics are. We've been clearing buildings; you can see the thinking behind it and that everyone has a part to play. Even though it is a small area, clearing through can take a long time so command and control must be on point.

What do you like about the reserve?

It is a break from my life, and completely different to what I do – I've gone from a ward to coming out here. I enjoy it, and it has been a chance to get exposed to the army early. I've always loved the military, and joining as a mental health nurse allows me to bring the two together.



‘You go from thick scrub into urban and subterranean environments and that requires a lot of resetting’





'It's changed me'

Name: LCpl Seb Philp **Age:** 45

Length of service: Five years

Day job: Black cab driver for 23 years

Why did you join up?

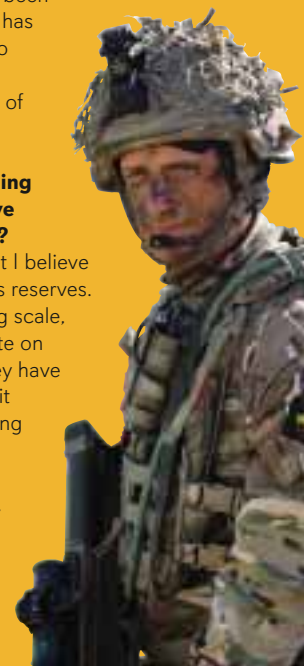
I've been volunteering with the Taxi Charity for Military Veterans since 2017 and have taken Second World War personnel to France and Holland, so it mostly came from that. My grandad also served in the Eighth Army, although he never spoke about the war.

What have been the highlights?

I've done a lot of exercises, including 12 days in the field on our last overseas annual training package in Spain. I did my lance corporal cadre in 2022 and the combat infantry course before that. I've also been skiing and snowboarding. It has changed me, but it is hard to explain how, and I enjoy the camaraderie and being part of a team.

How have you found training in Gibraltar, and what have been the main takeaways?

It is a small training area, but I believe that is a good thing for us as reserves. You are not thinking on a big scale, so you can really concentrate on your skills and drills, and they have put things in place to make it harder. We have been working in six-man sections, rather than eight, which has its pros and cons. For example, if you go man down you are obviously weaker, but having a smaller number of people makes comms a bit easier.



» "You go from thick, dense scrub into urban and subterranean environments and that requires a lot of resetting. You need a larger soak period to assist with the next part of the battle plan - we don't get a lot of that when training in the UK.

"This area is only 350 metres in length, but it takes a long time to clear. Some of the troops expected it would take an hour, but they were still going four hours later - that has caught them off guard.

"The guardsmen are also facing an enemy that does not stay in situ. They are looking to exploit our flanks, any tiredness or a lack of patience, so there is much to think about.

"We did a lot of preparation in the build-up and shaped our training around what we would be doing here. To be successful we need NCOs who can use initiative and think for themselves, and they have quickly adapted to the environment.

"It will be interesting to see how they develop their TTPs when we go full subterranean."

A platoon sergeant in G Coy, CSgt Neil Forde served for 14 years in the Welsh Guards, which included tours on Op Herrick and Op Toral, as well as two deployments to the Falklands. He also qualified as a

jungle warfare instructor.

Like Capt Whiteman, he didn't want to turn his back on military life when he left the full time army and immediately joined the London Guards as a reservist.

"It has been interesting," the 37-year-old (pictured right) says of the transition. "I went from the regulars to a civvy job working in finance and later moved to Jersey.

"But I have been able to come over for training weekends and big exercises.

"This is my first time in Gibraltar.

"Tactically, it is very conventional, and we have the complexity of the urban environment to think about.

"We've used drones to scan the area to get an idea of the enemy picture, as well as the battlespace, and that has

»



‘Step back and keep calm’

Name: Gdsm Harjot Dhah **Age:** 27

Length of service: Three years

Day job: Running a social housing property management company

What were your motivations for joining?

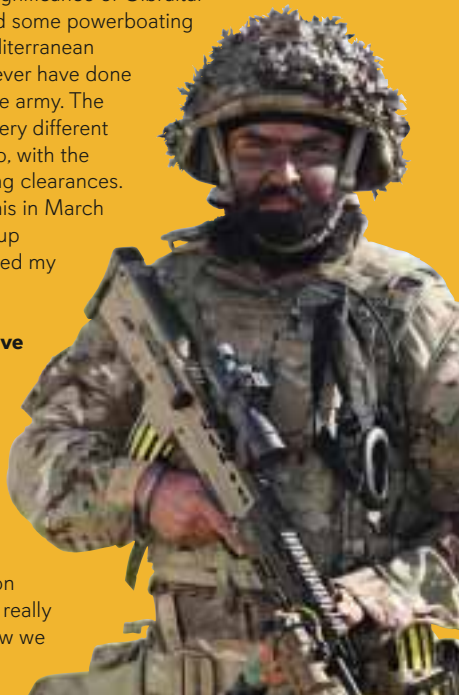
I've always had an interest in the army. I have a Sikh background, and military service is in our heritage – my great-grandfather fought in the First World War. With my work commitments I could never go full time so I decided on the reserve option.

Describe some of the things covered during your time here?

We learnt about the significance of Gibraltar to the British Army, did some powerboating and sailing in the Mediterranean peninsula – I would never have done that if it was not for the army. The green side has been very different to what we are used to, with the vegetation and building clearances. We were told about this in March and did a lot of build-up training; it has exceeded my expectations.

What key lessons have you learnt?

To take a bit more care and not rush in – sometimes it is important to just step back and keep calm. I got ‘injured’ on the last serial and learnt a lot from that on reflection. The DS are really helping in terms of how we can improve.



» helped make informed decisions.

“The enemy has been a lot more free-thinking – this is real-world stuff. We’re not just facing two guys in the open and have to consider where they are going and what they are planning.

“We’ve also had Atak kit, which has been great in terms of situational awareness. Having things like that keeps us up to date with what the regular army is doing.”

The NCO is also impressed with the way his counterparts are adapting to the challenges posed and believes they will take a great amount from the experience.

“They all have normal day jobs, and some are performing at quite high levels across areas such as government and technology,” CSgt Forde continues.

“It is great that they are willing to come and do this in what is their spare time.

“In terms of skills, there are a few things reservists will inevitably fall behind on when compared to the regulars, who are doing this all the time.

“But give them the training opportunity and they are pretty good.” <<





'It's about staying switched on'

Name: Gdsm Ash Wright **Age:** 28

Length of service: Two years

Day job: Mechanical design engineer

Tell us about your journey to the reserves.

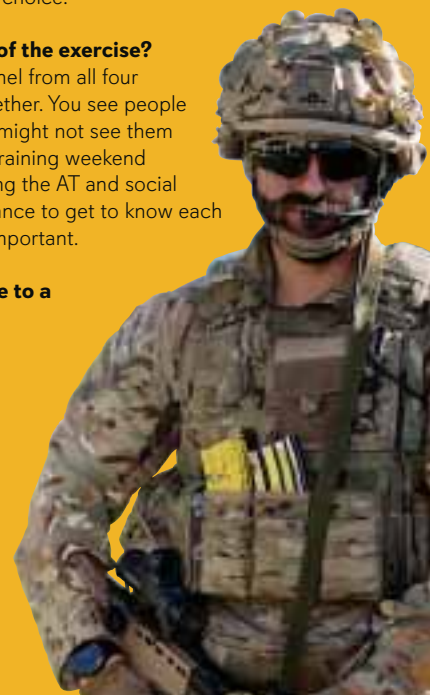
I was in the army cadets as a youngster. My parents were both in the Royal Air Force; I wanted to join the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers but couldn't on medical grounds, so I went down the route of education and finding a career in the civvy world. When it came to the reserve I wanted to be in the Infantry as it was different to the day job. The London Guards had a company close to where I was living at the time, so that was my choice.

What are the benefits of the exercise?

It is a chance for personnel from all four companies to come together. You see people when you join, then you might not see them for a while unless it is a training weekend or annual exercise. Having the AT and social side first gave us the chance to get to know each other better - that was important.

How does this compare to a training weekend?

We'd be in a tactical environment for 24 to 36 hours doing lessons or actual actions, but here it is fully tactical for four days. It gives us experience of doing routine for long periods and as reserves, we don't often get that. It is about staying switched on and doing the basics well.



FACT FILE: London Guards

1st Battalion, London Guards was formed three-and-a-half years ago, having previously been known as The London Regiment

It is a Guards reserve battalion with four companies across London from different cap badges - Coldstream, Grenadier, Irish and Scots Guards

They train individually every Tuesday, with the battalion coming together for a training weekend each month

Two companies deployed to Gibraltar - one formed of Grenadier and Coldstream Guards, the other from Scots and Irish Guards

Like their regular counterparts, they combine front-line infantry skills with ceremonial duties

The unit boasts a rich array of civilian professions - from opera singers and politicians to black cab drivers and carpenters

Interested in joining? Scan here



‘I couldn’t sit at home while my country was invaded’

Operator lifts the lid on front-line drone missions in Ukraine



U **KRAINIAN born but a naturalised Canadian, Illya Sekirin volunteered to fight against the Russian aggressors attacking his homeland as war broke out in 2022.**

Originally serving as an infantryman, he later became a tactical drone operator before going on to act as a translator and unofficial adviser to the Ukrainian High Command.

Last month, he was among the guest speakers at the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research conference at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where he addressed an audience that included the chief of the general staff on the nature of drone warfare in Ukraine and its future development.

Afterwards, he sat down with *Soldier* to reflect on his experiences in the conflict...

Interview: Richard Long

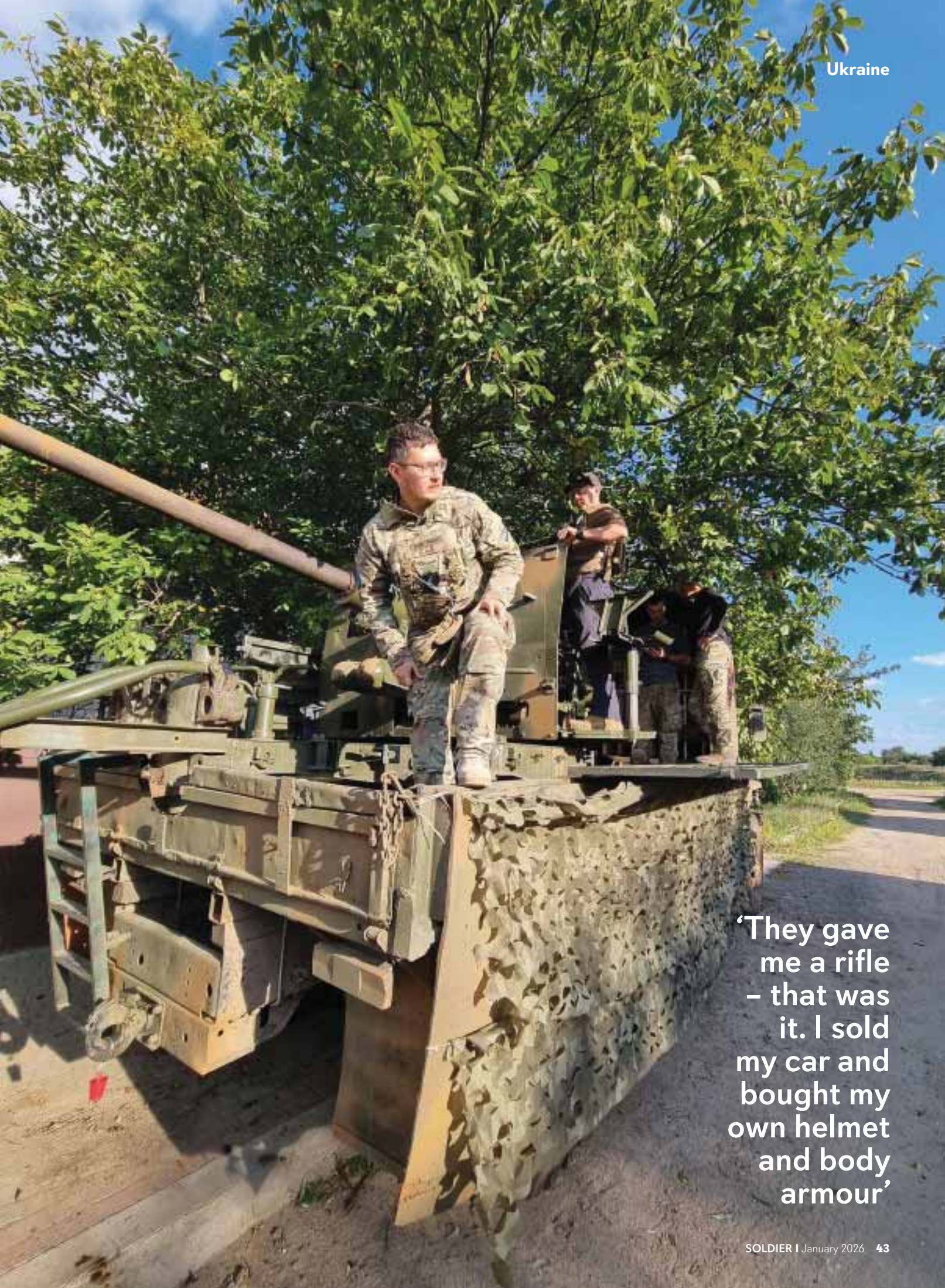
Tell us about your background

I was born in Ukraine, but my father went to study in Canada. I started spending time there and got my citizenship – that’s how I became a Canadian and it’s where I learnt English. At the time of the war, I had been living back in Ukraine for a couple of years – I ran an IT business and had a degree in cybernetics and while I was not in the military, I was kind of connected to drones.

What was your reaction to the outbreak of war?

I took my then girlfriend and drove to central Ukraine. I couldn’t sit at home while my country, and that of my ancestors, was being invaded. For example, if somebody attacks your mother you don’t consider if he is stronger than you, or if there are several of them and whether they may have knives – you protect your mother.





‘They gave me a rifle – that was it. I sold my car and bought my own helmet and body armour’



How did your military journey start?

I joined a volunteer battalion that accepted foreigners. I remember as I was driving into Kyiv and clearing the checkpoints I was told 'it's dangerous, don't come here'. I said, 'that's exactly where I need to go'. I was the first foreigner to arrive at the unit, and we initially stayed in a university building. Then other volunteers started turning up and soon we were up to 30.

Describe life in the battalion

It wasn't a battalion of like 500 people – it was 100, maybe 120. There were guys from English-speaking countries like America and the UK, as well as Germany, Finland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Poland. The language of communication was English, but not everybody had combat experience. We had several guys from the French Foreign Legion and some who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What training did you receive?

There was no real infantry training. There were some medical drills, like how to apply a tourniquet and first aid, but it was basic level stuff. Because I spoke three languages – Russian, Ukrainian and English – I became kind of a fixer for this group, as well as an interpreter and fighter. I became the second in command. During all my volunteering in Ukraine I never signed a contract. They gave me a rifle; that was it. I sold my car and bought my own helmet and body armour with protective plates.

What ops were you involved with?

We were about to enter combat in early April 2022. We went to a front-line village, but the Russians had already gone. We found some machine guns and just did some practice instead. We were used as an auxiliary force; if a platoon attacked a village, we would clear the streets after the army had moved through and find any stragglers.

So how did the move to becoming a drone operator happen?

I went with a couple of foreign fighters to a national guard special operations detachment. We were going to be responsible for evacuating the wounded and picking up the bodies of dead soldiers. There was a short drone course, and some Ukrainian pilots showed us the videos they had made. At that time I didn't have any combat experience. I saw the videos those guys made – they were spotting artillery with their Mavic 3 drones – and got excited, so I decided to sign up for the course.

How did things progress from there?

At that time, there was a lack of pilots and instructors, and they offered a more intensive course that would see me become an instructor on civilian quadcopters. I could then go out to army units at the front line and teach them by example; how to do reconnaissance and artillery spotting. I was also trained on how to drop fragmentation grenades, although they didn't work against armoured targets.

What were drones being deployed for at this stage?

The main use was for reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition. We could get to know where the enemy was and what he's doing. If we had some artillery pieces nearby, we could use civilian technology to stream the video feed for the guys at the headquarters. I would use the coordinates to see where the artillery shells landed and then correct them if needed. We started seeing tangible results. I was making trips to the front and was engaging the Russians as a drone pilot myself and teaching others.

When did you realise the advantage drones could deliver?

The Russians had the idea of doing a pincer movement – using their armour to surround Ukrainian forces in the Donbas. So my unit was primarily hitting tanks from one of the elite Russian formations. It then dawned on me that if we were effective, we could easily blow up their fighting vehicles, and the war could potentially be over as they would have none left. I also understood that the use of drones could provide tactical advances. For example, if we had 100 drone pilots we could advance on a narrow front, like 100km, and easily break through. However, we had limited resources and it was not possible.

How long would you deploy for?

I would be at the front for a week and then go home, maybe for two weeks. I would then come back for another two weeks. As a

‘The drone is the new king of the battlefield – all other weapons are subordinate’



Picture: Getty Images

drone pilot, if you're involved in small-arms fire contact with the enemy you're doing something wrong. Normally you don't come up close, but of course at times I experienced contact. I didn't shoot back because I didn't want to unmask my position. I was focused on flying my drone, as that is what I do best. I had bullets hitting all around me, plus shrapnel, mortars and multiple rocket launchers. I had a British medic, Adam, and thought it was good to pair up with him in case something went wrong.

The Mavic 3 was the main drone being used. Why was it so popular?

It's easy to operate and many pilots preferred it to any other drone. You can buy it for like two hundred dollars at the supermarket. At the start of the war the range was much smaller; it had a theoretical range and communication link of up to 15 kilometres. My own front-line record was ten, but most would go up to three, four or five kilometres. They also have the 3T; this is the thermo variant that comes with infrared sensors, which you can use at night.

How did things evolve from there?

The first-person view (FPV) drone came in 2023, and this is when we were able to engage Russian armour. I focused more on surveillance and artillery direction, but I worked with FPV teams and we supported each other. They were more vulnerable to electronic warfare (EW) so their imagery and video feed was not as good. The Mavic 3

would give directions to enemy targets, then the FPV would attack.

And how does the situation now compare to the start of the war?

There has been an exponential rise in the quantity of drones. The battlefield is much more saturated than when I first started flying. Previously, we were often trying to find the Russian drone operators. It was always a priority, and they were trying to find us. Ukrainian and Russian commanders realised that drones are so effective, and they started to put resources in and committed to enlarging the capability. Both now produce more than one million drones a year and the range has increased greatly.

Tell us about the initial Russian drone threat

Theirs could go further, but there weren't too many of them. And because they were flying higher, they couldn't see a very detailed picture. They were also easier to hide from – if you stood behind a tree, you'd be okay. The troops called them chainsaws because the motors were so loud. The Russians used them in conjunction with artillery, and they were pretty fast to fire. I think they had some kind of link established with self-propelled howitzers, so they engaged targets quickly.

You then started advising the Ukrainian high command and deputy prime minister, among others. Did they embrace the potential of UAS?

Unfortunately, some generals were not too receptive to the idea of drone warfare and my proposals. That has changed now obviously, when you see the capability and what it can achieve. I said they needed to form large drone formations on a brigade level to make operational manoeuvres, whether that is defending a section of the front line or making a penetration. But they said they had UAS companies and didn't need anything larger. It took them a year to say 'let's do brigades'. Had they immediately listened, they could have overwhelmed the enemy and had the advantage.

Where do things stand now?

The Ukrainians are making small steps, but so are the Russians, and it's difficult to find a breakthrough solution. The Russians are coming up with things themselves, like the use of fibre-optic cables. The Ukrainians had created a sophisticated system of EW and blinded the Russians with the FPV interceptors. But their fibre-optic drones are immune to those, and we didn't expect a lot of the destruction that was caused by them.

Is it possible to predict the future use of drones in the war?

This is something that is constantly evolving, so I don't know where it will be in one year from now. I think we're going towards a drone blitz, where you surround the enemy on a narrow section and try to envelop them from the rear. The Russians have the Rubicon, a specialised drone unit, and their main idea is

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Picture: Graeme Main



to destroy Ukrainian pilots. They're trying to gain UAS superiority over the battlefield so they can then do whatever they like with the Ukrainian defenders without facing a drone threat. They are also trying to cut logistics, so they have the facility to operate at longer ranges and isolate the battlefield. With UAS superiority they can then support the ground troops moving in.

What impact have UAS had on troops on the ground?

The situation in the kill zone is changing. Take medical evacuation: now, because drones are omnipresent, it's very difficult to get a wounded soldier out. There's no golden hour rule - it's just impossible. A wounded soldier often has to stay in position for six or seven hours. You apply the tourniquet and get them out as soon as you can. Medical training of soldiers needs updating so they know how to stop the bleeding, pack a wound, maintain circulation or give antibiotics.

How important have drones become to an army, do you think?

They are the main striking power of a land army, for sure. The drone is the new king of the battlefield, and all other weapons systems are subordinate to it. If you are planning military operations, whether offensive or defensive, the first thing you need to think about is how to deploy drone forces. The strength of Ukrainian combat brigades is down to 20 to 30 per cent. In a normal conflict, without drones, the Russians would

have already captured Kyiv. It's not effective for a formation to perform even a defence if it is 30 per cent manned. But the drone saved the situation because Russian infantry and tanks could not get through the kill zone.

Does this mean the role of the front-line infantryman is redundant?

There is the idea of a 'line of drones' project, making a continuous kill zone for the whole of the front and then to try to push it forward, from 20 to 40 kilometres, etc. Some commentators say if you do this you don't really need infantry. Of course, that is not true, and you will need some to take strongholds. But you probably need less than you did at the beginning of the war. So you may have five guys holding a kilometre of front line, which is a necessity, but you don't need more than that. The Russians have more, but because it's difficult to supply them and take out the wounded, they are getting people killed for no reason - it makes them a target. You must try to conceal and disperse your positions and try to have the human line as low as possible.

So what impact will this have on the soldier in future?

Their role is to survive; this is number one. And second, of course, will be to help the drone. Small groups of infantry will not attack without a drone above them. At the same time, this requires less training for personnel because a lieutenant can make all the decisions remotely. They will be told what to

do over the radio with the commander sitting at the screen and directing the battle.

What can personnel do to have the best chance of surviving against a drone?

Deploy drone detector frequency scanners. These use the radio spectrum and while you don't always know if they have found a drone or not, at least they start beeping. It's dangerous to move in the open in vehicles without these detectors, so they are a must-have. And, of course, be on the lookout. If you're driving and hear the detector beeping, stop and seek cover because the drone is probably trying to detect the vehicle, not the individual soldier.

Your book *Rise of the Machines - Drone Warfare in the Russia-Ukraine War* is out this month. What was the motivation for writing it?

I wanted to share with the Western reader - not only armies, but the wider public as well - the importance of drones and to raise their awareness of a possible confrontation with Russia. I also wanted to tell my own story about how I served on the front line. There is a focus on my personal deployments, a couple of which I describe in detail.





BRITISH infanteers picked up valuable winter warfare tips from the Finnish during Exercise Northern Axe. Fifty troops from 3rd Battalion, The Rifles travelled to northern Finland. Read more about their chilly outing on page 9.
Pictures: Chris Fletcher



**BIG
PIC**



FIRST CONTACT

How the army is upskilling instructors moulding the next generation





Report: Cliff Caswell Pictures: Graeme Main

Name: SCpl Owen 'Tommo' Thomas
Current role: Staff member, Army Instructor School
Cap badge: RHG/D
Years of service: 2003-2025 Regular; 2025-present Reserve
Operational Experience: Includes Banner (Northern Ireland) and Telic

THERE is a saying in the army that, just like a good schoolteacher, a first section commander will never be forgotten by their recruits in phase one training.

The junior NCO responsible for taking young civvies through the basics of military life, looking after their wellbeing and ensuring they make the best transition into uniform has a seminal impact.

These leaders can, in no uncertain terms, be the making – or breaking – of a career.

"Honestly, a decent section commander is going to stay with a recruit for life," says SCpl Tommo Thomas (RHG/D), who is responsible for getting troops ready for the leadership role at the Army Instructor School, Pirbright.

Out on the ranges and beneath the slate-grey winter skies of the camp, he surveys a group of students going through their qualifications to supervise live firing.

"Being a section commander at any training establishment can be a hard posting with early starts, late finishes and a lot of time on exercise," he adds. "You have to be a role model to a group of people who can have different levels of life experience – with 18-year-olds and those in their 30s in the same cohort."

He pauses for a moment as weapons are loaded, pulling out squidgy yellow ear defenders from his trouser pocket.

"It's tough, but satisfying," he concludes.

These are wise words indeed – and said with intent.

Along with his colleagues, SCpl Thomas is determined that trainee instructors are ready from the day they begin the role.

They will have the benefit of knowledge drawn from a refreshed and more thorough preparation programme here in Pirbright.

And it is underpinned by a new pre-employment training course >>

A decent section commander is going to stay with a recruit for life

SCpl Owen Thomas, RHG/D

Right Staff at the Army Instructor School closely supervise aspiring section commanders as they work through required range qualifications for their new roles

» to ensure candidates meet demanding leadership and resilience standards.

Personnel then undergo an army version of the two-week defence instructor package, in Pirbright or elsewhere, and courses that qualify them for jobs such as exercises using blank ammunition, IED awareness and live firing. Some will provide them with recognised civvy qualifications.

The junior NCOs certainly have the very best to help them as they take on the mantle of developing the army's next generation.

Having expanded the school by 20 per cent in the past year, CO Lt Col Ed Thompson (RE) has focused on developing his own group of senior staff, who have decades of experience as well as service on ops in the likes of Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere among them.

"We need people who are going to get after the training culture and help us improve on it," the officer tells *Soldier* from his headquarters at the school.

"As well as growing over the last few months, we changed our name from the Army Recruiting and Initial Training Command Staff Leadership School to the Army Instructor School – put simply, this better defines our role."

Ensuring aspiring section commanders, who either volunteer for the role or are nominated by their chain of command, are fit for purpose has been a priority, he adds.

The new pre-employment package focuses on the behaviours expected of leaders while ensuring they are robust enough for the demands ahead.

"The course is followed by a package on mental resilience," Lt Col Thompson continues. "Later on, the candidates also complete specialist qualifications, such as skill-at-arms and instructing live firing."

Ultimately, the full training regime is designed to turn out rounded individuals. But the boss believes more can still be done – and that there are lessons to consider from allies putting training front-and-centre.

"I recently visited America – there, the US Army takes the top ten per cent of troops and uses them in both recruitment and training," he reveals. "They want the very best people to help bring in the next generation and encourage them."

"There is a definite link between the two areas – selecting and then developing people."

The CO's ethos is embodied by his team, several of whom have donned uniform again and returned as reservists to help troops training the next generation.

SCpl Thomas is a case in point. Having served a busy Household Cavalry career he is back in the fold on a full-time contract and is

assisting with delivery of the preparatory training course.

"I deployed to Northern Ireland and Iraq during 22 years as a regular – ceremonially. I was also on horseback at the King's Coronation and have instructed our riders," he adds. "But importantly for me, this role gives me the opportunity to impart that knowledge to our new section commanders, who will go on to help our recruits as they make that transition from civvy to soldier."

"Curiously, Pirbright is also where I began my service with the army all that time ago, so there is something symbolic in finishing where you began."

As SCpl Thomas removes his ear protection – the range serial now complete – his aspiring section commanders are equally enthusiastic about their new role.

"Helping people through their phase one training is a great thing to be a part of," says Cpl Laura Bradshaw (RAMS) as she takes a break from the firing point. "From a personal point of view as an NCO, however, it is also good to hone new skills on these courses and to get the right qualifications."

"I was really fortunate to have a great section commander at the start of my career – he was a good egg and it's true they are somebody you remember."

Fellow student LCpl Yahkeem William (RLC) agrees.

"Being here at Pirbright is great – you're learning all the time," he adds. "I'm looking towards a posting at ATR Winchester, so that is going to be my likely next move."

It is – undoubtedly – a daunting time for these junior NCOs who will shoulder the demands of introducing the greenest of recruits to the tough realities of service life.

But with the best training, underpinned by the experience of those who lived some of the army's most intense ops of modern times, they will be ready. <<

"We need people who are going to get after the training culture and help us improve on it"

Lt Col Ed Thompson, RE





EXPORT LICENCE

AS WELL as assisting young section commanders, staff at the Army Instructor School have been expanding their footprint across the service.

Their host of other work includes taking their expertise to units to deliver training, and passing on their years of wisdom to aspiring military mentors.

Elsewhere, they have also been involved in Op Interflex – the UK-based action to prepare Ukrainian personnel for fighting against the Russian invasion.



“Being here at Pirbright is great – you’re learning all the time”

LCpl Yahkeem William, RLC

T H E A R M Y 2 0 2 6 P H O T O

FLASH MOB

Want to get your pictures noticed?
Entries to the **Army Photographic
Competition 2026** are open...

GRAPHIC COMPETITION



“**M**

OST people, when taking a photograph, place their subject bang in the centre, which is frankly boring,” WO1 Barry Lloyd (RLC) explains to *Soldier*.

And this man should know – he’s the army’s command master photographer, responsible for overseeing service picture-takers.

However, this year’s Army Photographic Competition is not just about the professionals – more than half of the categories (shown overleaf) are open to amateurs.

“Always try to find a different viewpoint,” the expert continues.

“Get lower or higher; try shooting the subject from multiple angles. Your first image will rarely be your most interesting.”

This is valuable advice in the age of the omnipresent smartphone and an almost infinite number of reels to scroll.

With such a tidal wave of military content available online, this contest represents a unique chance for soldiers – and professional photographers – to get their talent noticed and, more importantly, make audiences pause to consider the incredible work that servicemen and women undertake every day.

“We often talk about people being our best assets,” WO1 Lloyd continues. “And that’s because it’s true.

“Images that capture our incredible workforce in action are generally more powerful than those of pieces of equipment or landscapes in isolation.”

If you require any more advice on what makes a good image, last year’s professional winner, Sgt Donald Todd (RLC, pictured



Pictures: Cpl Danielle Dawson

collecting his award from singer and photographer Bryan Adams), has some sage words.

“This competition is one of the few opportunities where your everyday work – the moments you capture on the ground, in training or with your team – gets seen, appreciated, and celebrated,” the senior NCO comments.

“Last year I entered with no expectation of winning. But the experience showed me how powerful our stories really are.

“To have my work recognised was incredibly humbling. It reminded me that even the small, everyday moments can have considerable meaning.”

If you are inspired by any of the images over the page from last year’s competition – which went on display to VIPs at the National Army Museum (above) – read on for details of how to take part.

The deadline is April 17 and winners will be announced in this magazine in early summer.



Report: Sarah Goldthorpe Main picture: Cpl Paul Squires, RLC

THE ARMY 2026 PHOTO



THE CATEGORIES

Army Photographer of the Year

A portfolio of six images – *RLC photos only*

Amateur Photographer of the Year

A portfolio of four images – *open to all (not RLC photos)*

Story of the Year

Six images from the same event that tell a story – *RLC photos only*

People/Portrait

One image of a member of the army – *open*

Capability (Kit/Equipment)

One image showcasing the best of the army's in-service gear – *open*

Best Video

Best video production showcasing the British Army – *RLC photos only*

Best Showreel

Best video production showcasing the British Army, no longer than two minutes – *RLC photos only*

No separate entry needed for the below categories – they will be picked from the entries above

Image of the Year

Best image from any of the other categories, selected by a panel of industry professionals – *open*

People's Choice

Best image from any of the other categories, selected by a public vote – *open*

Pictured: A selection of the entries from last year's Army Photographic Competition



THE WINDOW

Pictures must have been taken between February 1, 2025 and April 1, 2026

GRAPHIC COMPETITION



Pictures: Sgt Donald Todd, RLC; Rfn Dominic House, Rifles; WO2 Kayley Butler, RLC; Mark Owens

THE RULES

- You must be a serving member of the British Army (regular or reserve) on the day you enter, or a civil servant employed by the service as a professional photographer
- Up to three entries per category
- By submitting an image to the competition, you give *Soldier* and the MoD permission to print it in the magazine and distribute it to outside organisations under the terms of Crown Copyright

- Capture must be between February 1, 2025 and April 1, 2026

HOW TO ENTER

Email your work – with the category you are entering stated in the subject line – to pics@soldiermagazine.co.uk before the closing date of **April 17**. Judging will take place in May with winners announced by this magazine – and the army – in the summer.

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YOUR letters provide an insight into the issues at the top of soldiers' agendas... but please be brief. Messages must include your name and location (although we won't publish them if you ask us not to). We reserve the right to accept or reject letters, and to edit for length, clarity or style. Before you write to us with a problem, you should first have tried to obtain an answer via your own chain of command.

'This housing perk should apply to everyone'

I WANT to express my concerns regarding the recent extension of the dual accommodation waiver (DAW).

It is a significant retention benefit, ensuring those who maintain a family home away from their workplace can access single living accommodation (SLA) without charge.

However, the new policy excludes married unaccompanied personnel who maintain a family home overseas, stipulating it applies only to privately maintained residences in the UK.

Serving in the military offers unparalleled opportunities, particularly for travel and service overseas and sometimes we can fall in love while posted abroad, marry, and decide to establish family homes to settle our dual national families outside the UK.

It's a shame this crucial retention allowance is now denied to those who face the greatest challenges in returning home to see their loved ones.

I hope this aspect of the policy can be reconsidered to ensure it supports everyone equitably. – **Lt Col Wassim Slim, RAMS**



Lt Col Clare Sapwell, Modernised Accommodation Offer, Army Headquarters, replies: The DAW replaced SLA waivers from all three services, which for the army was the over-37 package.

It applies to eligible personnel irrespective of age, marital status, or rank and as a result has been well received.

The current policy remains in effect until March 31, after which the MoD has confirmed the DAW will go from a temporary to permanent waiver, ensuring long-

term support for eligible service personnel.

Overseas properties do not qualify for a residence at work address such as SLA under this scheme. To qualify, personnel must maintain a property outside daily commuting distance (more than 50 miles or 90 minutes' travelling time by public transport of the duty station) and located in the UK.

Choosing to live abroad is a personal decision, made with awareness that service will require time away from home.

'IT'S BEING DENIED TO THOSE WHO FACE THE GREATEST CHALLENGES'

Slow payment pain persists

I RECENTLY submitted a claim on JPA regarding costs from an overseas task.

I finally received the funds five working days later.

Why is it I can transfer money from one UK account to another in minutes and make payments internationally normally within two hours, yet it takes the MoD nearly five days to pay me money I am owed?

Yes, people can claim for an advance in pay on JPA of, I believe, up to 80 per cent

of the expected outlay, but that doesn't mean the money gets to your account any quicker.

– **Name and address supplied**

Lt Col Steve Harrington, Current Operations, Armed Forces and Veterans Services, replies: Expense claims are paid through BACS, with authorised claims processed for payment normally within three working days, so weekends can extend

the time it takes to receive funds.

It is not feasible for the MoD to condense this process due to the manual entry procedures and segregation of duties.

Making faster payments would require two individuals, one to create transactions and one to authorise them, resulting in a time-consuming and cost-inefficient process given the volume of business.

For context, during the three-day period when your claim was in the system, a total of 19,460 individual payments were processed, amounting to £6.5 million in value.

DIRECTORY

Bite-sized data to keep you in the know

WELFARE

If you have a problem, your chain of command and unit welfare teams are a good starting point. They may also be able to help you find local support groups not listed below. Padres can provide individuals with pastoral care and moral guidance, whatever their faith. Here are some other national organisations that can offer help:

Army HIVE

These centres provide information for the whole military community on a wide variety of topics affecting their everyday life, including relocation, accommodation, health and wellbeing, finance, non-UK nationals, education, employment, deployment, resettlement, military discounts and local area information.

army.mod.uk/hives

Forcesline

A free and confidential telephone helpline and email service for regulars, reserves, ex-forces and their families.

0800 731 4880

ssafa.org.uk/get-help

Army Welfare Service

Contact directly via rc-aws-iat-0mailbox@mod.gov.uk or **01904 882051/2053**

Forces Connect

A free, simple, advert-free and confidential app that signposts soldiers, veterans and families to local and national organisations that can help them with everything from crisis support to business advice or housing. No personal information required. forcesconnect.co.uk

ALCOHOL AND SMOKING

If you are concerned about someone else's health or your own you can get confidential, free advice from your medical officer during routine hours, or your unit duty officer.

Drinkline

A free, confidential helpline **0300 123 1110**

NHS support

Various information can be found at nhs.uk/livewell

BULLYING/ HARASSMENT/ DISCRIMINATION

Army Mediation Service
0306 770 7691 or
mil 96770 7691
army-mediation-0mailbox@mod.gov.uk

Army Speak Out Helpline
0306 770 4656 or **mil 96770 4656**
army-speakout@mod.gov.uk

Defence BHD Helpline

Confidential, freephone and outside the chain of command **0800 014 2381**

DEBT AND MONEY PROBLEMS

These can be a considerable burden, made worse by dealing with them alone. The following organisations can provide support.

Forces Pension Society

A not-for-profit, independent military pension watchdog and enquiry service **020 7820 9988**
forcespensionsociety.org

Joining Forces Credit Union

Saving and affordable loans for the armed forces community from not-for-profit financial cooperatives
joiningforcescu.co.uk

Money Helper

Government-backed money and pensions guidance with a wealth of in-depth guides, tools and calculators
moneyhelper.org.uk

National Debtline

A charity that can talk through your options and help you take back control **0808 808 4000**
nationaldebtline.org

StepChange Debt Charity

The UK's leading debt charity offering free, confidential advice **0800 138 1111**
stepchange.org.uk

GAMBLING

National Gambling Helpline free information, support and counselling for problem gamblers in the UK **0808 8020 133**

GRIEF

Cruse Bereavement Support
0808 808 1677
cruse.org.uk

SSAFA supports people who have been through a similar tragedy, giving you the opportunity to talk through your emotions with an understanding group supportgroups@ssafa.org.uk

RESETTLEMENT

Career Transition Partnership employment fairs help support the transition to civilian life by providing resources, networking opportunities and direct access to forces friendly employers. To book your place at an event visit modctp.co.uk

Newcastle – February 5

Lincoln – February 25

Bristol – March 19

Maidstone – April 23

Edinburgh – April 29

HOUSING

Single living accommodation

Faults and issues must be reported to the local contractor – Vivo, Mitie or Vinci or your unit quartermaster, depending on location. Check common areas for posters detailing local procedures. Inform your chain of command if you believe repairs are not being properly dealt with.

Pinnacle Home Services Team

The primary point of contact for families for housing, the allocation of SFA and details of local housing officers **UK 0800 031 8628**
Overseas +44(0) 161 605 3517
pinnacle-services.com/contact-us

Forces Help to Buy

For home ownership support visit gov.uk/guidance/forces-help-to-buy

Single Persons Accommodation Centre for the Ex-Services
01748 833797
spaces.org.uk

Veterans Gateway

A first point of contact for veterans seeking support veteransgateway.org.uk

INJURY/SICKNESS Personnel Recovery Centres

These centres can be found across the United Kingdom. To find out more about your local service, speak to your unit welfare team, search for Army Recovery Capability on Defence Connect or send an email to rc-pers-arc-0mailbox@mod.gov.uk

LONELINESS

Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Clubs

A network of clubs to enjoy breakfast and banter, while combating social isolation afvbc.world

Samaritans

Someone to talk to, night or day, for free and without judgement **116 123 samaritans.org**

The Royal British Legion

Contact the friendly team for information about local groups and support services **0808 802 8080**
britishlegion.org.uk

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

There's always someone you can talk to. Speak to your friends or family, boss or padre, unit welfare staff (details above), medical officer or GP. Charities and other organisations also provide support, including...

Combat Stress 24/7 Helpline
0800 138 1619

Headspace

All British Army personnel and civil servants can access this mindfulness app for free with an @armymail.mod.uk or Modnet email address. To try it out visit work.headspace.com/britisharmy/member-enroll

Mind – The Mental Health Charity
0300 123 3393 mind.org

NHS

General mental health support nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters

COMPETITIONS

November 2025 winner
HOAY 1002 (MAJORITY BOOKSHELF SPEAKERS)
Phillip Sell, Essex

RULES: Winners chosen at random from valid entries. Unless stated otherwise, competitions are open to readers aged 16 or over only. We have no responsibility for incorrect, incomplete, lost or delayed entries. Any winner will be bound by our terms and conditions. Where we are unable to contact a winner within one month, or any prize cannot be taken up or is declined or returned undelivered, a substitute winner may be drawn. At that point, the original winner shall cease to be eligible. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. *Soldier* is compliant with the Data Protection Act. We will not pass your details to a third party without your prior consent. Automated entries, bulk entries or third-party entries will be disqualified. Competitions are not open to *Soldier* employees, competition sponsors or anyone else connected with the competition, or the immediate families or agents of the foregoing. We have the right to verify the eligibility and identity of any entrant. Prize winners acknowledge and agree that neither *Soldier* or any competition sponsor(s) or any of their employees, agents or subcontractors shall have any liability whatsoever in connection with the winner's use and/or possession of the prize.

Op Courage

A specialist NHS service for armed forces leavers, reservists, veterans and their families. Search for "Op Courage" on nhs.uk to find your local team

Samaritans

116 123 samaritans.org

The Ripple Pond

A self-help support network for relatives of physically or psychologically injured troops and veterans
0333 900 1028
theripplepond.org

Togetherall

A safe, online community where people support each other anonymously
togetherall.com

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN/ABUSE

Aurora New Dawn

Safety for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking
02394 216 816
aurorand.org.uk

ManKind

Support for male domestic abuse victims
01823 334244
mankind.org.uk

Relate

Relationship support
relate.org.uk

SEXUAL OFFENCES

Anyone wishing to report an incident can do so in multiple ways. It does not matter if your allegation is not recent, or if you believe there's no evidence. There is no need for anyone to speak directly to their chain of command.

The **Defence Serious Crime Command**

is responsible for investigating crimes such as sexual assault and harassment within defence and operates independently of the three services. Contact them 24/7 via the Service Police Crime Bureau on **02392 285 170**

Crimestoppers can be reached at **0800 555 111**

Alternatively, complaints can be reported directly to the **civilian police**.

To discuss victim support contact the **Victim Witness Care Unit**, which operates independently from the chain of command, on **07974 074259** or via people-dscwvcugroup@mod.gov.uk. Your information will be treated in confidence and you can discuss your options for reporting any allegations.

Further support can be found on the **Defence Connect Call it Out Hub** or via the **Speak Out Helpline** on **0306 770 4656** or army-speakout@mod.gov.uk

STAFF NETWORKS

The following groups are open to regulars and reservists and civil servants.

LGBTQ+ Network
elizabeth.corbett117@mod.gov.uk

Multicultural Network
priscilla.quansah100@mod.gov.uk

Parents Network
armypers-parents-network@mod.gov.uk

Servicewomen's Network
samantha.dodge733@mod.gov.uk

NCO ACADEMY

Development Days 2026
Feb 19 - Kinloss (39 Engr Regt)
Mar 25 - Grantham (150 RLC)
May 13 - Brancote (30 Sigs)
May 21 - MoD Lyneham
July 8 - Edinburgh
Sept 16 - Thorney Isle (16 RA)
Oct 21 - MoD Lyneham
Oct 26 - Chepstow (1 Rifles)

Search for the *NCO Academy* on *Defence Connect* for more information.

SEARCH

Paul Borres is trying to trace a member of the **Royal Army Medical Corps** who was based in Soest, Germany in 1971 named Shirley. Email paul21_b@hotmail.com

UKSF BRIEFING COURSE

This six-day package is the first step for anyone wanting to attempt selection for UK Special Forces - regular or reservist. For more on 2026 courses search **UKSF** on Modnet or Defence Connect.

Course name	Date
1/26	Feb 1-6
2/26	Mar 8-13
3/26	Apr 12-17
4/26	May 10-15
5/26	Jun 7-12
6/26	Sep 6-11
7/26	Oct 18- 23
8/26	Nov 15-20

Your chance to **WIN**



... A Highlander Forces kit bundle worth £170

TEN details have been changed in this image of The Band of The Royal Regiment of Scotland at Edinburgh Castle.

Circle all the differences on image **B** and send the panel to HOAY 1004, *Soldier*, Ordnance Barracks, Government Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 2DU, along with contact details, including email address, by January 30.

A photocopy is also acceptable but only one entry per person may be submitted. Alternatively, email a photograph of the image highlighting the differences to comps@soldiermagazine.co.uk

The first correct entry drawn after the closing date will win a tasty kitbag from Highlander Forces, including the robust 44L Forces Elite Pack with rain cover and lightweight, warm and weather resistant Halo Full Zip Tactical Jacket.

Born in Edinburgh and tested in the rugged terrain of Scotland, this company has been designing and producing performance-oriented tactical and survival kit for more than 40 years.

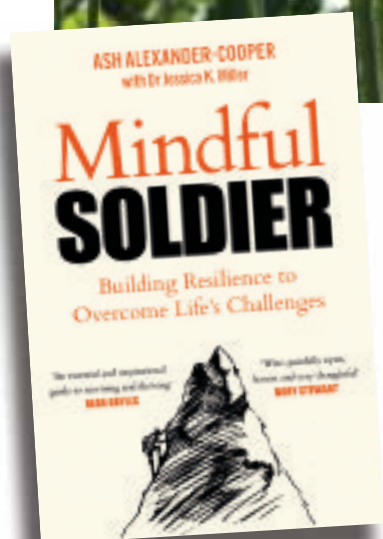
Buy online at highlanderforces.com where *Soldier* readers can save 15 per cent with discount code SM15 (T&Cs apply).



Picture: Mark Owens

REVIEWS

★ BOOKS ★ PODCASTS ★ GAMES ★



Mindful Soldier: Building Resilience to Overcome Life's Challenges by Ash Alexander-Cooper is out on January 21, published by Quercus and priced £22

Mindful Soldier

Veteran shares resilience tips for tough times

BOOK

HOW to survive and thrive through trauma – a fitting topic to get to grips with as we drag ourselves back into work after two weeks comatose in front of whatever Netflix and the bottom of the Quality Street box could serve up.

Unlike January's credit card statement, however, this book is definitely one to savour amid the new year comedown – especially if life is proving a bit of a struggle.

Written by retired colonel Ash Alexander-Cooper (ex-RGR) in partnership with world renowned

trauma specialist Dr Jessica Miller, the title combines real-life experiences inside and outside the army with the 'clever sciency bit' to help readers navigate life.

From a traumatic childhood to the sharp end of elite ops in the Herrick era, the author examines his responses to fear, loss and self-doubt to draw out lessons in resilience.

Second-guessing yourself as a leader is probably something that will chime with any soldier in command of others, even if it didn't happen in the context of firefights with insurgents.

Life lessons from Afghanistan and beyond. Above Royal Marines patrol in Gereshk, 2009 Right A Royal Welsh soldier in Nad-e Ali, 2010

GAMES

Commanding performance

Why the resurrection of an older gaming genre could help develop a new generation of soldiers...

SO-CALLED management games were a staple format during the early PC era – but they’ve become more of a niche pursuit in modern times.

It is a shame – certainly from *Soldier’s* perspective – as these titles are not only great fun, they can help hone some of the decision-making skills relevant to military situations.

This was particularly true of 1990s classics such as Interplay’s *Castles and Pirates* from Microprose – where players had to respectively run a medieval kingdom and 17th century privateer ship, all while making tactical calls and political compromises.

But now sci-fi indie outing *What the Stars Forgot* marks a welcome return to the genre – with gamers playing a computer with oversight of a starship.

We quizzed developers Justin Fischer (above, left) and Brock Feldman (right), of Los Angeles-based studio Airlock Games, about the project’s origins.

What is the player’s role in the game?

You play the AI behind a spacecraft and have to manage and assign the crew on it. Everybody has



skills at the start but they will develop in other areas if you empower them.

But it’s not a straightforward flight?

No – strange things start to happen and you have to try to keep your people alive. Later on, it is likely you will have to make decisions to put crew members in places where they are not best qualified just to keep the spacecraft running.

What were your influences in all this?

Obviously, classic TV and movie series such as Star Trek and Star Wars. The sci-fi horror genre, particularly the Alien films, were big influences as well. In terms of games, the Sims titles were a favourite.

You’ve both worked on some big games in the past. Why does the indie scene appeal?

We missed the creativity of more focused games. Here, we can focus on providing new experiences that interest us as players and developers with the freedom to take risks, push boundaries and tell stories.

Are you looking at a console version?

It is currently available for PC, on Steam, and we are being guided by feedback from our community. We can certainly look at other platforms down the line.

Interview: **Cliff Caswell, Soldier**



PODCAST

The Wargame

from Sky News



FOLLOWING

last year’s series about a theoretical attack on the UK by Russia – and how vulnerable Britain would be were the scenario real (*Soldier*, July) – Deborah Haynes and co return to dissect the financial and political decisions that led to the current state of play. Across two new episodes, almost every defence secretary since the end of the Cold War plus former top brass discuss, with seemingly newfound honesty, how decades of cuts have critically undermined the armed forces. Procurement mistakes, the failure to appreciate the threat posed by Russia in time – it’s frustrating in the extreme. If you weren’t already depressed by January, this may just tip you over the edge.



Becky Clark, *Soldier*

One to watch...

HITTING the shelves on January 15, *Rise of the Machines* tells the story of drone warfare in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Read our interview with its author Illya Sekirin on page 42.



A veteran of eight Afghanistan tours, Alexander-Cooper found himself in the thick of combat on multiple occasions, losing comrades and surviving near-misses along the way.

These are recounted in heart-pounding detail – as well as the psychological after-effects he observed in himself and colleagues – making the book part military memoir, part self-help manual.

And away from the professional sphere, just about everyone will recognise some of the personal setbacks the former officer describes, not least an acrimonious relationship break-up.

The difficulty when dispensing any form of advice based on your own experience – especially when your life is outside most people’s

frame of reference – is making it relatable to the average reader.

But by delving into the scientific thinking behind the concepts he is discussing, Alexander-Cooper shows how anyone can apply the same techniques.

Introspective without straying too far towards navel-gazing – another pitfall of the genre – this is a well-written, easy-to-read offering that should prove useful to anyone facing adversity or just generally wanting to understand more about mental health, be that their own or other people’s.

And let’s face it – in these turbulent times, we need all the help we can get.



Review: **Becky Clark, Soldier**

SOLDIERSPORT



UPPING THE POWER



OCdt Zargham Farooq faces the deadlift

POWERLIFTING

GRASSROOTS development was the primary aim as the Army Powerlifting Union (APU) staged its annual full-power winter championships at Minley.

More than 40 athletes stepped on to the stage at Gibraltar Barracks to be tested in the squat, bench press and deadlift disciplines – with a host of personnel tasting competitive action for the first time.

Among those to make their debut was OCdt Zargham Farooq (NWOTR), who saw the event promoted on social media and applied to take part.

The move paid off as he posted new personal best totals in the squat and bench press and the 19-year-old is now targeting the APU's summer championships later in the year.

"I've never competed before and thought this would be

a good opportunity to meet new people and gain some experience," Farooq, who is studying law at the University of Greater Manchester and is planning a full-time career in the army, explained.

"I got a big number in the squat – 135kg – and the bench press went well, even though my third attempt was a little iffy. But I was hoping to go a bit heavier on the deadlift.

"I was quite nervous coming here, but the warm-up gave me confidence, and I started crushing the weights – I'm actually surprised at how well I have done.

"Coming away, I now realise that preparation is key. I only had a few weeks, but others have been working towards this for months. I also need to focus more on the referee's words of command when on stage.

"I'll definitely be coming back for the next competition and will

start my prep this month – I want to smash it.”

New personal bests were also clocked by Cpl Katie Wood (AGC (RMP), pictured below) in the women’s draw as she posted 105kg in the squat and 155kg in the deadlift.

A relative newcomer to the sport, she entered her first contest in 2024 and was part of the army women’s team that triumphed at last year’s Inter-Services in Plymouth.

“I like weight training and thought it would be a good crossover,” she told *SoldierSport*.

“I started training specifically for powerlifting after my first competition and have been to a few events now – it’s all good experience.

“You are not going to get a personal best at every competition, but as long as you’re not going backwards there is always something to aim for.

“I’ve never played any sport before. I was not that interested at school and as adults we perhaps think it is too late to get into it.

“It has been great and I just want to keep going now and see if I can make the Inter-Services team again next season.”

Fellow army team member Cpl Kelly Ure (AGC (RMP)) first sampled the sport at an introductory session aimed at female personnel and after being identified as an athlete with potential started training with a powerlifting coach.

Her first proper competition was last year’s summer championships, where she posted personal bests in all three categories to earn selection for the Inter-Services.

“I was up in Leuchars with

no hobbies; I was going to the gym but had no real goals,” she said. “When I tried powerlifting and was told I had potential it made me want to get the right coaching and training.

“At first, I thought it might be quite cliquy, but everyone has been so supportive – they push you to go harder.

“The Inter-Services was a big one to get selected for and that spurred me on to come here. I now want to stay involved to see how far I can go.”

APU President Maj Jo Ellett-Swiggs (RE) was delighted with the turnout on the day and said the organisation strives to support personnel at all levels – from novices to those competing on the international stage.

“Our aim is to help people be the best they can be,” the officer, who transitioned to the sport from bobsleigh, explained.

“This may be run like an international competition, but we can give coaching along the way.

“We want personnel to go through the motions and improve between all three lifts. It is about having a positive impact on the individual so they will come back next time and bring someone else with them.

“PT in the army has changed, with the focus now on functional strength. The soldier conditioning assessment has a deadlift, and everyone bench presses at the gym, but I think people perhaps don’t know their own strength.

“So why not give it a go in a structured environment like this? You might surprise yourself.”

Details of all upcoming events and how to get involved can be found on the APU page on Defence Connect, or follow the organisation on Instagram.

LOGGIES DELIVER ON RING RETURN

BOXING

FIGHTERS from 6 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps made a triumphant return to the ring as they overcame the challenge of 3 Medical Regiment in their first boxing evening for three years.

The Loggies claimed a 5-2 win from the seven bouts staged between the two units and were victorious in nine of the 12 contests that formed the full programme at Dishforth Airfield in North Yorkshire.

Pte Jake Millthorpe was among those to impress as he defeated a corps-level opponent, while LCpl Ben Naylor triumphed over a more experienced rival in the fight of the night.

And Pte Thomas Lowe was named best boxer.

Maj Gemma Darrington, Officer Commanding 64 Close Support Squadron – who provided eight squad members – also competed in her first contest in eight years

– securing a first-round win via a stoppage.

“As this was probably the last chance I would get to box, I was determined to make it count,” she said.

“A lot of my squadron were involved so I wanted to train with them and if I was good enough, compete.

“It was an opportunity to get to know people in a different environment, and that can only be a benefit.

“Putting yourself on the line is a positive thing, it shows you are willing to do the same as the soldiers.

“We had seven boxers selected for corps trials on the back of this show and our next aim is the RLC championships in May.”

The regiment benefitted from having a Team GB coach in the ranks in the shape of Sgt Kerryanne Keane, who helped the personnel train two or three times a day, over 12 weeks, in the build-up.

“It’s been great to see them develop,” she said.

“The sport of boxing elicits many of the attributes we demand in a warfighting situation – courage, fitness, fortitude and intellect.”

‘IT’S GREAT TO SEE THEM DEVELOP’



POWERLIFTING BY NUMBERS

2 Annual grassroots army powerlifting championships

4 Events run by the APU to qualify new coaches each year

8 Female personnel competing in the latest winter competition

20 Athletes set to train at Loughborough University in March



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Capt Keady Smith reaches for a return

INTERNATIONAL
BADMINTON
ARMY 2 V FRANCE 13



FRENCH SERVE UP EARLY SEASON TEST

Pictures: Graeme Main

BADMINTON

THE French military provided a stern test for the army badminton team as they started preparations for this season's Inter-Services campaign with a loss to their cross-Channel rivals.

A two-day training camp preceded a day of on-court action at the Aldershot Garrison Sports Centre, where the two sides squared off in a series of singles, doubles and mixed doubles matches.

The tourists signalled their intent from the outset as they won three of the four singles ties, although the soldiers claimed a notable scalp as Pte Bishal Khadka (QOGLR) triumphed over Paralympian Meril Loquette.

The former Nepalese under-19 player made a storming start against the double European para champion before being pegged back in the second game. However, he held his nerve in the decider as a 21-16

success saw him secure a famous victory.

"I was excited to face him as he's the world number two para player," Khadka (pictured right) told *SoldierSport*.

"He changed it up in the second game, using his experience and tactics, but I managed to move him around the court in the third to build the rallies and points.

"He is a professional who trains four or five hours a day, so it is a great win for me."

Loquette gained revenge by beating Khadka in the doubles, with the army's top female pair - Capt Keady Smith (RAMS) and LCpl Imogen Storey (Int Corps) - also tasting defeat.

The duo had earlier lost their singles matches to Laura Moire and Ines Vandenhone respectively.

"We were working really hard," Smith said after her doubles tie. "We were supportive of each other but wanted to have some fun as well.

"The French are a good team, and this is an opportunity for us to look at some new partnerships and work on a few things. They are a fit outfit, and we are trying our best."

A total of 16 players were in action for the army, and the squad is due to face Durham University later this month as their build-up to March's forces clash continues.

"The French have strong national-level players in their squad, as do we," said men's skipper Capt Tom Machon (RA).

"This is the first opportunity we've had to get everyone together since the summer.

"It is a chance to see how well people are playing and who we might take forward to Durham.

"Selection for the team is so competitive and there are those who were included last year that might not make it this time round. The Royal Air Force have won it for the past couple of seasons, but there is no reason why we cannot be strong."





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WOMEN'S RUGBY UNION

ARMY 10 V GB POLICE 17



Pictures: Graeme Main

LEARNING BRIEF

RUGBY UNION (WOMEN)

A HOST of new faces pulled on the famed red shirt for the first time as the army women's team made a losing start to the 2025/26 campaign.

The soldiers came out firing in their clash with the British police in Aldershot and two tries saw them establish a 10-0 advantage in the first half.

However, the visitors hit back to lead 12-10 at the break and then added a third score in the second period as the army failed to find their attacking rhythm in the heavy rain.

Their best opportunity came at the death, but when second-row forward SSgt Heidi Silcox (RAMS) was held up on the line the chance to draw level had gone, leaving the police to celebrate a 17-10 win.

Silcox, SSgt Sarah Batley (AGC (RMP)), LBdr Jess

McAuley (RA) and skipper WO2 Jade Mullen (AGC (SPS)) formed an experienced spine to what was a largely experimental side and the latter believes the newcomers - many of whom impressed at a trials camp a month earlier - will learn a lot from the game.

"It is early days, and this was an opportunity for people to put their hands up and get some experience," Mullen told *SoldierSport* afterwards.

"It is a big step up from the corps game, so it was exciting for them. The result didn't really matter in the end.

"One of the positives was how quickly the girls got into the structure of playing red shirt rugby - it proves the interest is out there.

"Players like me, who have more than 25 caps, are coming towards the end of our careers and this shows there are people

ready to progress the jersey."

The army return to action on January 15 with an away trip to London Irish, in which they are expected to field another inexperienced team.

Clashes with Bury St Edmunds and the Irish Defence Force follow next month.

"London Irish will be another opportunity," Mullen continued. "From there we will start forming a squad for the Inter-Services. Hopefully, a few of these girls can put their hands up to be in the mix.

"That competition will be hard. As champions we try not to be complacent and there are always things we can work on.

"Retaining the Inter-Services trophy is the prime objective for this season."

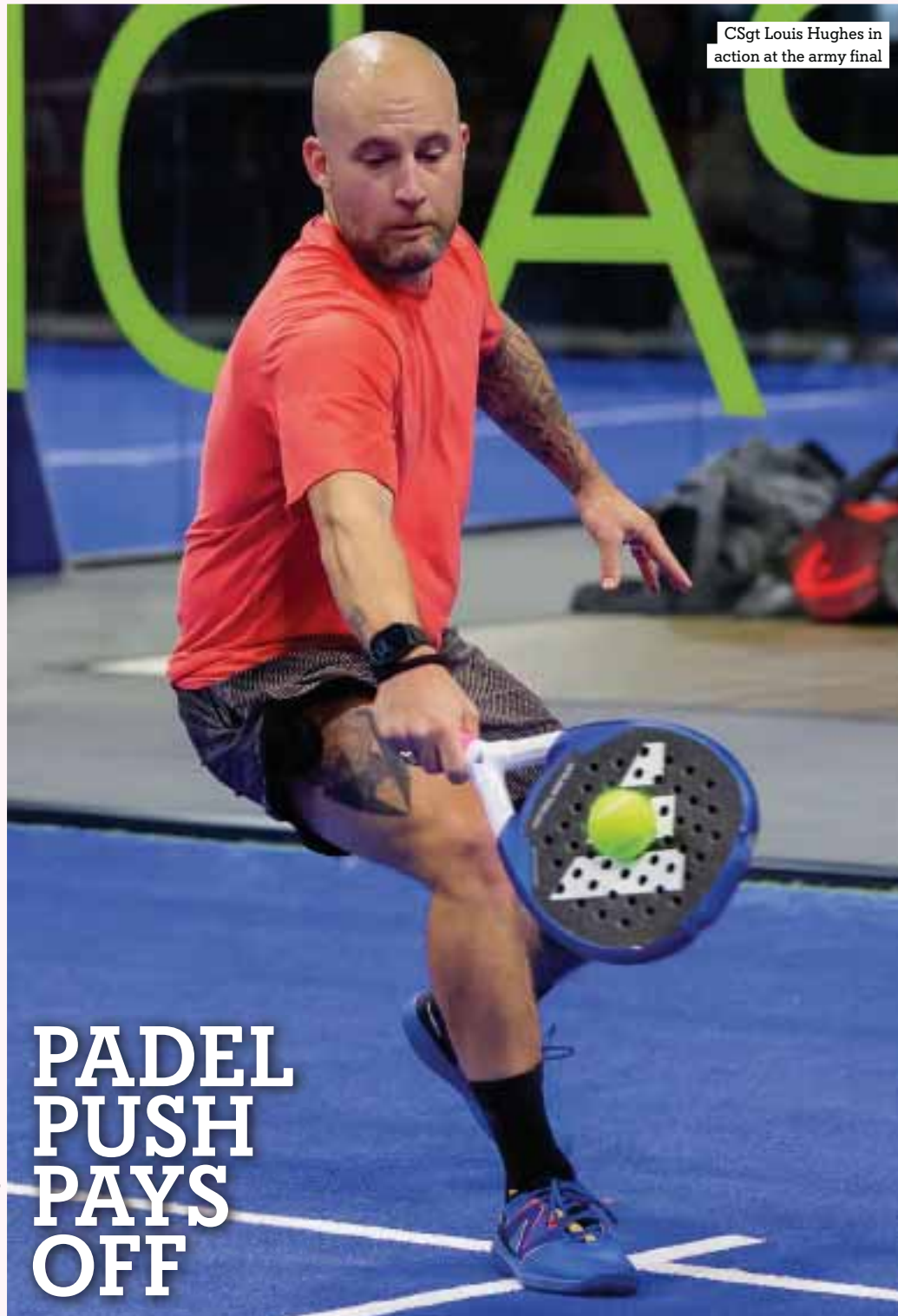
The Reds face the Royal Navy at Twickenham on May 2 before travelling to Gloucester to take on the Royal Air Force on May 16.

ELSEWHERE...

The army has announced a landmark partnership with Premiership Women's Rugby that will champion female sport and encourage more women to consider military careers.

Service branding will feature on the shirts of match officials this season, while community engagement initiatives will tell the stories of those succeeding in both rugby and the army.





CSgt Louis Hughes in action at the army final

PADEL PUSH PAYS OFF

Pictures: Beth Proddger

PADEL

FURTHER signs of the growing momentum in padel were witnessed last month as the army hosted its inaugural championships in Bordon.

The discipline received category three recognised status in the summer and those at the helm were quick to capitalise on the announcement by seeking expressions of interest from

across the ranks.

That resulted in 50 players taking to the court for the two-day tournament, which was eventually won by the pairing of Capt Juan Vilches (RLC) and CSgt Louis Hughes (Para).

The duo triumphed 7-5, 5-7, 6-2 over Lt Col Clare Griffiths (AGC (SPS)) and Lt Col Greig Taylor (AGC (ETS), pictured right), who formed dogged opponents in a high-class final.

"It was a super-tough game," Vilches told *SoldierSport*. "They worked really well together, so we're happy to take the win."

"To be the first army champions is an absolute privilege. It is exciting that padel is now a service sport and I'm looking forward to future events."

"I didn't know Louis before this, but he understands the game and how to play, and that made it easy for me."



Lt Col Clare Griffiths fires a backhand



Hughes added: "I had no idea who I was going to be paired with and, luck of the draw, I got one of the best players here."

"I've been playing for 12 months but didn't know about the army padel set-up. A friend then sent me an email about this and I applied straight away."

"It has been a fantastic competition and the level across the board has been very high."

"This is one of the fastest growing sports in the world and it is only going to gain traction in the army."

Griffiths is also predicting a bright future for padel as she believes the discipline is well suited to athletes crossing over from other pursuits.

"I played hockey for 25 years, so this is my next challenge," the officer explained.

"You have squash players who are excellent with their angles,



Those eliminated early were then offered a coaching clinic to make the most of their time at the civilian venue.

"We had the right final, with the two best pairs going to head-to-head," he said.

"The level of interest has been fantastic. We had around 80 people initially sign up, which was way more than expected, and that eventually became the 50 who played.

"We wanted to make sure everyone got two full days of padel. If they were knocked out on day one, they didn't have to go back to work as we were able to offer some coaching.

"Our next aim is to introduce learn-to-play sessions so we can grow at grassroots level. We have to work out how we are going to do that as we are still a category three sport, but there are 80 or 90 people out there who have never played before that want to have a go.

"These championships have been great, but moving forward we want to see as many new faces as possible."

With the tournament complete, Owen said the organisation can now select an army team for the first Inter-Services competition that will hopefully be staged this year.

"We are the first to run a single service championship," he continued. "But the interest is out there in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force.

"Long term, we need to keep growing to see if there is scope for padel to come away from the Army Tennis Association and become a standalone sport.

"But we are in no rush, and for now sitting within that structure is working well."

Army Padel is looking to launch pages on Instagram and Facebook, as well as Defence Connect. Search online to find out more.



Lt Juan Vilches

and you can spot tennis players a mile off as they try to drive the ball hard. Whatever sport you come from, you can adapt."

Capt Harry Owen (REME), OiC Army Padel, was thrilled with the success of the debut tournament, which saw 25 pairings initially compete in groups of five before progressing to the knockout stages.

EXPANSION PLANS TAKE SHAPE

PADEL

WITH the first army championships now ticked off, thoughts are turning to creating the infrastructure that will allow the sport to flourish further.

This month the ground will be cut on a new purpose-built padel facility next to the Army Tennis Centre in Aldershot which when complete will boast six courts for personnel to use.

Looking ahead, it is hoped similar projects can be rolled out in major garrisons such as Catterick, Colchester, Tidworth and Bulford.

However, Bicester has stolen a march on the other locations having opened two courts last summer under an initiative fronted by garrison quartermaster sergeant instructor and padel player, WO2 Richard Hailwood (RAPTC).

With public funding not an option, he approached an array of charities, as well as the lived experience innovation fund, to cover the £68,000 cost.

"The PT Corps wants to push Wednesday sports afternoons as much as it can," he told *SoldierSport*.

"The core pursuits have always been football and rugby, but that demographic

has changed. We looked at what was the fastest growing sport, and it was padel.

"We have a really big hangar at the garrison gym and were looking to upgrade our physical training equipment. We still had space available and as I had played padel I thought it would be a great opportunity."

The facility is also open to veterans, contractors and dependants, among others, who pay a small fee to help cover running costs.

"We are seeing a lot of young soldiers playing," said Hailwood, who was one of six players from Bicester to compete at the army championships and progressed to the last 16.

"When I first joined, sports afternoons were very busy, but I've also been at units where it is not a priority.

"I think new disciplines, such as padel, are definitely a good way of keeping personnel engaged.

"It is so inclusive, it doesn't matter if you are male or female, young or old - it cuts across a lot of barriers."

'WE WANT TO PUSH SPORTS AFTERNOONS'

Courts similar to those at Bordon are coming to Aldershot



PADEL BY NUMBERS



2 Days of action at Advantage Padel, near Bordon

50 Players taking part in the inaugural championships

2 Army courts already in operation at Bicester Garrison

JOHNSTONE STEPS UP AFTER BOX CUP WIN

BOXING (WOMEN)

VICTORY at the Women's Winter Box Cup saw Cpl Felicity Johnstone (RLC) catch the eye of England's national selectors.

The 24-year-old inflicted a second-round stoppage on Blue Flames' Charlie Miller in the semi-finals before defeating Erin Tynan, of Holmes Chapel Boxing Club, in the final to seal her first senior-level title at the tournament.

The win then saw her invited to an England development camp, with the 52kg ace showcasing her talents in Sheffield as this issue went to press.

"I'm absolutely buzzing," the soldier, who combines training with her role as a section commander at ATC Pirbright, said. "Getting a big result like that has given me a huge confidence boost."

'IT IS A HUGE CONFIDENCE BOOST'

"I fought Erin last season at the nationals and stopped her in the first round, so I knew she would come for me."

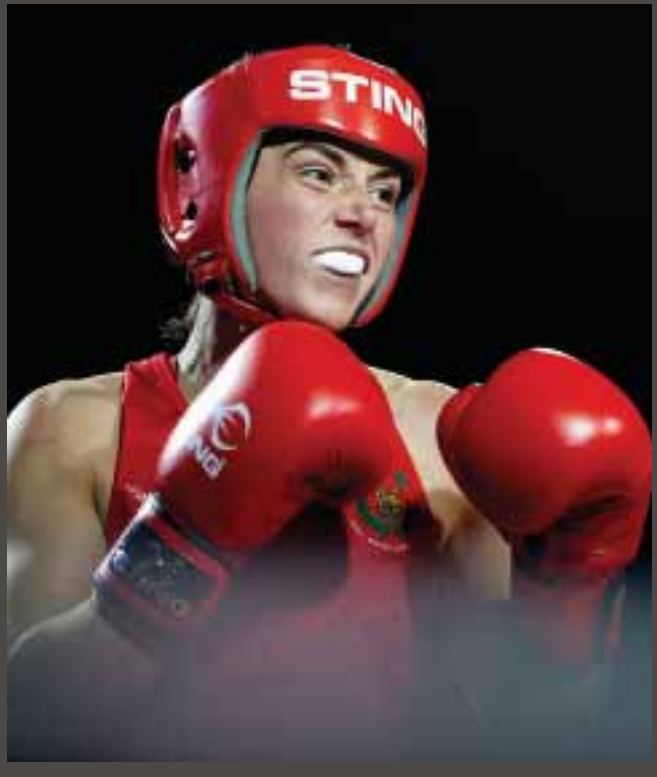
"I moved forward, switched my attacks and angles and forced a standing count in all three rounds to get the unanimous decision."

"This competition is getting bigger each year and most of the girls here will be at the nationals, so getting the win shows I'm in a good position."

Johnstone had not boxed prior to joining the army and was inspired to get involved by the success of other female personnel – many of whom have excelled on the international stage.

"After I won I was handed a letter from the England team," she added. "I wasn't expecting that. I will go along, do my thing and see what happens. I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for the army team."

Cpl Terri-Leigh Stuart (REME) also triumphed at the event, while fellow team members Pte Kasharna Williams (RLC) and Gnr Lucy Kisieleska (RA) claimed bronze medals.



Picture: Cat Goryn/Alligin Photography



Sig Sulayman Suwareh leads a UKAF attack

COURT GAINS MADE DESPITE SETBACKS

BASKETBALL

PLAYER availability issues and the strength of opposition added to the challenges faced by the UK Armed Forces at the Shape International Basketball Tournament.

Commitments in the day job meant just three army players were named in the women's squad that lost pool fixtures against Canada and France, before succumbing to the Netherlands in the fifth/sixth place play-off.

However, Cpl Charlie London (RAMS) impressed on her return to the sport after three years away, while LCpl Shannon Purves (RAMS) made a strong impact with her rebound skills and physicality.

Pte Tamara Samuel (RLC) also showcased her potential in what was her debut UKAF outing.

After a 79-44 loss to eventual champions Lithuania and a narrow 55-53 defeat to Canada, the men's squad ended their pool stage on a high as they beat the host Shape team 88-44 for their first victory at the competition in five years.

Their campaign concluded with a 96-48 reverse against Latvia in the fifth/sixth place play-off.

Army trio LCpl Anish Tamang (REME, pictured right), LCpl

Bailey Kahmar (RE) and Sig Sulayman Suwareh (R Signals) all stepped up when required, with the former earning praise for his consistent contributions.

"This year's tournament showcased the grit, talent, and determination of our athletes, even under difficult circumstances," said UKAF secretary Capt Anyegwi Tambi Spicely (RAMS).

"With more experience now under their belts the teams are motivated and optimistic as they prepare for next season."

The trip also saw long-serving referee WO2 Ian Lester (RAPTC), the event's lead official, make his final appearance at Shape.



Picture: Jarrad Hulm/Alligin Photography



YOUNG REDS FALL SHORT

RUGBY UNION (MEN)

THERE was disappointment for the army in the concluding fixture of this season's Inter-Services Under-23 Championships as defeat to the Royal Air Force saw them finish bottom of the pile.

A 26-17 reverse in Cardiff followed on from the Reds' 16-14 loss to the Royal Navy and the result saw the airmen claim their first silverware in the

competition for 19 years.

An early try from wing Spr Will Sevodi (RE) gave the soldiers the perfect start in Wales, only for their rivals to strike back and level the contest at the break.

The champions-elect moved through the gears in the second half with ASI Kieran Jenkins taking centre stage.

The fly half slotted a brace of penalties before crossing for a superb individual try, and a

second score then saw them take command of the tie.

The army hit back with two efforts late on, but the RAF held firm to secure the win.

Elsewhere, the army men's sevens team will head to Fiji later this month to compete at the Coral Coast Sevens tournament.

A 14-man squad has been named for the competition, which will be staged at Sigatoka's Lawaqa Park from January 15 to 17.

RUGBY LEAGUE

THE army men's team have been handed a home clash with Wests Warriors in the first round of the Challenge Cup.

The tie will be played at Aldershot's Army Rugby Stadium on January 10 (1400 kick-off) and is a rematch of their second-round clash last season, which the soldiers lost.

Elsewhere, the women's team is continuing its mission to attract new talent by holding a two-week training camp for players of all experience levels from February 2 to 13.

Follow [@armyrugbyleague](#) on Instagram for more details.



Picture: Graeme Main

TENNIS

THE grass courts of Australia await the army men's tennis team as they head down under on their latest overseas tour this month.

The trip will also see them train in Singapore and features a 20-strong squad made up of senior and masters players. As well as facing local club sides they will go head-to-head with the Australian Defence Force.

A women's team featuring former army number one Cpl Chloe Pike (Int Corps, pictured) toured the Czech Republic before Christmas.



Picture: Graeme Main

Picture: Graeme Main



GOALS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

HOCKEY

GOAL difference proved the deciding factor in this season's Inter-Services Indoor Hockey Championships as the army's senior teams saw silverware agonisingly slip from their grasp.

Both squads headed into the tournament as defending champions, and they made the perfect start to their campaigns against the Royal Navy, with the men triumphing 4-3 and the women 3-2.

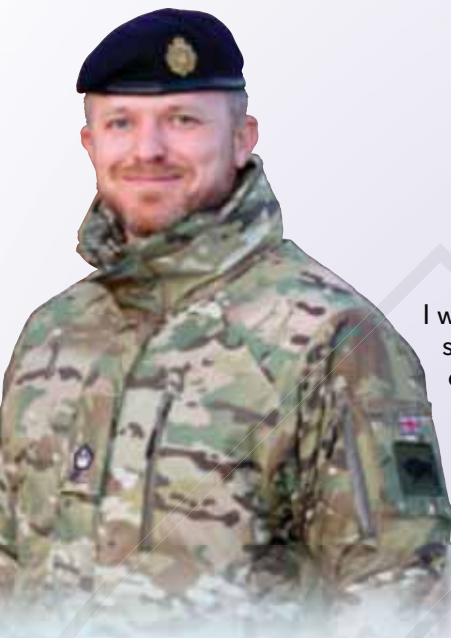
Close battles with the Royal Air Force then followed as the men drew a high-scoring encounter 4-4, while the women's clash ended 2-2.

But with the RAF recording bigger winning margins against the senior service, they claimed both titles. The army did have cause to celebrate though as the under-25s won their respective competition, while the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers were victorious in the corps/region tournament.

Let's do this

How do you grizz out the January blues?

Interviews: Soldier team Pictures: Graeme Main



I wouldn't say that I have seasonal affective disorder, but January is definitely a depressing month. It is a time when I throw myself into the gym and remember to take vitamin supplements.

Maj Ben Collishaw, RLC

Being self-employed, I have a quiet start to the year. I've just bought my first house so it will be nice to have the time to focus on that. We also have a range weekend planned, so that is something to look forward to.

Gdsm Rory Jakeman, Ldn Gds



It's important to set goals and have the discipline to follow them through. If you do not have a hobby, start one.

Gdsm Harjot Dhah, Ldn Gds



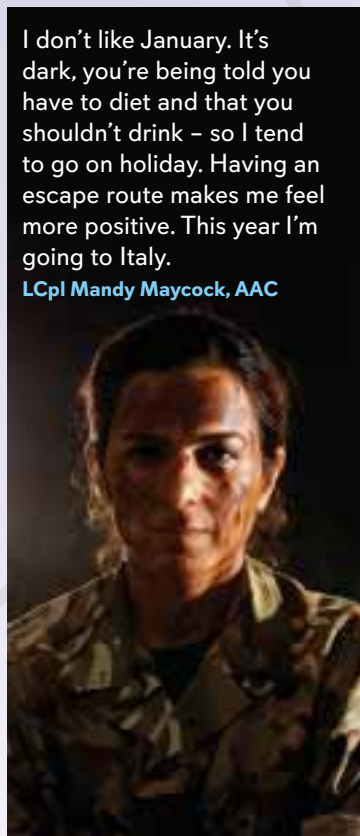
To be honest, I'm not much of a Christmas person so I don't have a problem with January at all. I actually quite like it – you notice the evenings gradually getting lighter and a new season coming.

LCpl Owen Stow, IG



It's my wife's birthday in January, which gives us something to look forward to after Christmas and at the beginning of the new year; her age goes up and my bank balance goes down!

LSgt Stephen Williams, IG



I don't like January. It's dark, you're being told you have to diet and that you shouldn't drink – so I tend to go on holiday. Having an escape route makes me feel more positive. This year I'm going to Italy.

LCpl Mandy Maycock, AAC

I like to exercise a lot. With the cold weather and darkness, it's easy not to do it, but I go outside more.

Gdsm Ash Wright, Ldn Gds



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